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OR,

The Clew of the Invisible Hand.

BY CAPTAIN HOWARD HOLMES,
AUTHOR OF "CAPTAIN COLDGRIP" NOVELS,
"HERCULES COLDSPUR," "SUNSHINE SAM,"
"SOL SPHINX," "DUDE DESPERADO,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

SUICIDE OR MURDER?

THE hazy morn of an Indian Summer day was breaking over New York.

The sun seemed to shine through a mist, and in the air, just a little crisp as it came up the Bay, the early risers shuddered as the coolness reached their skin.

A man just risen was putting the finishing touches to a very plain toilet when he was interrupted by a knock on his door and opening it he stood face to face with a boy of thirteen, but with a keen face and bright eyes.

"Well, sir?" demanded the man, who was about thirty-five, with a smooth face and a penetrating look.

"NOW, MR. GRIP, DO YOU SEE ANYTHING—THE IMPRINT OF A SHADOWY HAND?"
THE GIRL DEMANDED.

"I guess you are wanted right away at the house?"

"At the house—"

"At Dorsey Drake's. Miss Iris sent me and she looks as if something dreadful has happened."

"Didn't she send a note?"

"No, sir. She told me to go for you—she gave me your address—and told me to tell you to lose no time getting to the house."

Gideon Grip looked sharply at the boy as if to make sure that everything was right, and saying that he would be along presently, returned to his toilet and saw the youngster slide out of the room.

Nearly every one knew Gideon Grip, yet to hundreds he was a mystery which had baffled them on more than one occasion.

He was one of the younger detectives of the city, had been "in the harness" nearly ten years, yet those who employed him never learned anything about the secrets he carried in his bosom. He was a secret-keeper as well as a secret-solver.

When he had completed his toilet, Gideon went down upon the street and started for the house indicated.

Dorsey Drake was not totally unknown to him, for on one occasion he had met him face to face in his own elegant residence, but now he was to meet the man under exciting circumstances; but though at the threshold of one of the greatest mysteries of his detective career, the Secret Shadower did not dream of such a thing.

Gideon rung the bell of the house and was admitted into a darkened hallway, but not too dark to hide the figure of the young girl who stood in his path.

"You are punctual," remarked this girl, in a voice but little above a whisper. "I am very glad to see you. Something terrible happened last night, and, as I am the first to know of it, I sent for you, for you once told me—the time I accidentally discovered your calling—that you would help me if ever I needed assistance. You haven't forgotten, have you?"

"Indeed I have not, but—"

"The blow fell last night and in your room is a dead man."

The fair white-faced speaker glanced toward a closed door as she finished, and the ferret thought she intended to turn away and leave everything else to him.

"Look here, Miss Iris," he said, catching her sleeve. "Let us call things by their right names at the start. Do you think it is a murder?"

"God knows, but that is for you to find out. Go and see for yourself. The door is unlocked and I am quite sure no one has crossed the threshold of that dread room since I left it." Then she was gone.

The detective advanced to the door which led to Dorsey Drake's large private room, which was well stored with books and various things of much value, and entering at once he found a soft, dull light pervading the place.

Stepping within he stopped near a chair in which a man's form bent over a little table near the middle of the room.

A moment's gaze and he knew that he was in the presence of another mystery.

He looked back, but the door by which he had entered the room was shut, as if the hand of Iris had pulled it to after him.

That the bent form at the table was that of Dorsey Drake the contour told him.

The face was buried in the arms that served as a frame for it and the hair, streaked with gray, helped to hide it from his prying eyes.

The Secret Shadower gazed at the figure for a moment and then ventured to lift the head until he could look into the face which was drawn and white, like the face of the dead, and then he saw that the eyes of cold gray were stareful and lusterless.

In another minute he had let the head drop back upon the arm, but started as if a sudden discovery had been made.

"It was nothing; the muscles did not twitch," said Gideon to himself. "This man is dead and has been so for some time."

He looked about the room and saw on the table a wine-glass and beyond it a curtain which extended across the apartment, and which concealed, as he had discovered on a former visit, a number of shelves containing the bottles and fixtures of a chemist's laboratory.

He was taking a silent inventory of all that was in sight when the door opened and he saw the inquisitive face of Iris there.

"You may come in," said the detective.

The handsome girl stole forward and stood before him, looking for the moment at the dead.

"Tell me all you know, Iris."

"I will do that, for you must know all I do, which is not very much. I don't know when death came to him, for, that he is dead, I saw the moment I entered the room this morning. But before I proceed I want to show you something which may have escaped your eye for you can see it only in a certain light and from a certain position."

Iris went to Dorsey Drake and lifted his head. She raised it until it was all revealed, and pressed

ed against the back of the chair in which the dead man sat.

"Stand off a little distance and look sideways at the face," she commanded. "There, that is about the spot. Now, Mr. Grip, do you see anything—the imprint of a shadowy hand?" the girl demanded.

Gideon was scrutinizing the face with all intent. Iris watched him as intently, for a few moments.

"I'll tell you how I came to see the mark—the hand," she said. "I lifted the head just as I did awhile ago, and happened to step back to let more light into the room when, all at once, the horrid thing stood out as plainly as the blood-mark of Cain. Don't you see it now?"

Gideon shook his head.

"What, has it vanished already?" cried the girl, fixing the head in its forced position and stepping to the shadower's side. "It was so plain when I found him. It was there, all the fingers, just as they were laid or pressed on the face. I thought it would be the first thing to startle you: but, heavens! it is gone!"

Grip, who now stood at the young girl's side, was looking more at her than at the figure in the chair.

"Are you sure it was no illusion?" he asked.

"It could not be a delusion. There it was, as plain as the brand of Cain. It sent a shudder through me the moment I beheld it. I thought it would be a clue for you. But, it is gone, though it is so firmly impressed on my mind that I can draw it from memory, and if ever I see it, no matter where, I will surely recognize it, for the hand was a peculiar one."

Iris and the detective stepped back to the dead, and Gideon again looked closely at the pallid face.

"They will try to make it out a case of suicide," added the girl, in a low voice. "Let them think what they please, but you must not go upon that theory. You see the wine-glass there, don't you? The odor that still arises from it is that of bitter almonds; but, he was always experimenting. He was looking for an elixir of life. I will not keep anything back from you now. He was always dabbling in strange drugs and the old mysteries of the ancients. Look here; but, you must have seen this before."

Iris had stepped across the room and was holding aside the curtain which concealed the shelves with the chemical appliances.

"He never went to bed before midnight, and I would be asleep when he retired, and sometimes did not hear him at all."

"How was it last night?"

"It was the same. I sat up reading, and the clock struck twelve before I made a note of time. Then I heard that door open, and thinking that he was coming up, I put out my light and sat still. But, the door was shut again, and no one came up the stairs. I went to bed, however, thinking I had stayed up late enough, and that he might discover me reading at that hour."

"You did not hear him after that hour?"

"Not a sound of him."

Gideon Grip picked up the wine-glass and put it to his face. As Iris had said, he perceived the odor of bitter almonds, and in the bottom of the glass was a sediment just perceptible under the strong light above the table.

"Who would do this, Iris?" he asked.

"I thought you would ask such a question. That is for you to find out, Mr. Grip; that is why I sent for you," she smiled just a little. "I have always said that all people have enemies. I believe I have them, but never mind that. That this man must have had a foe, this midnight tragedy tells us plainly. I wanted you to be first on the scene, and as you may not have completed your investigation, I am going to leave you again."

"One moment, Iris," said the ferret. "How did you find the doors this morning?"

"All locked."

"And the windows of this room?"

"I found them as they are now, fastened from the inside."

Gideon Grip's gaze swept the room again. He saw Iris withdraw, and once more he was alone with the dead man.

"This is a dark night's work, and the imprint of the hand on his face is not the least of the mystery," he said to himself.

He crossed the room to the window which looked out upon the street, and put his face close to the slats of the inner blinds. The sun had come up, and was shining on the street without.

He let his eye wander across the thoroughfare, and take in the row of houses on the other side. They were not all as fine as the one Dorsey Drake had inhabited. The one directly opposite was a two-story frame, painted yellow, but without blinds.

As he lifted his eye to the upper windows of this house, he caught sight of a face there—the face of a woman, and the eyes were riveted on the window where he stood! The detective for awhile watched the face, which seemed to have all the keenness of a lynx's.

It did not move, but remained fixed like the face of a statue, and the more he looked at it the more he felt like sending for Iris—he could

do so by tapping a bell on the table—but refrained, for it might, after all, amount to nothing.

Gideon was turning away from the window when the door opened for the second time, and he met the young ward of the dead man.

"Have you seen that inquisitive creature?" exclaimed Iris, with a quick look at the window. "She has been sitting at that window for six months watching us as if her life in some way depended upon her vigilance."

"Who is she?"

"Heaven knows; but I know she is always on duty. Mr. Drake used to look across the way at her, but never interfered with her work, and now she is there, unsuspecting the crime that was committed last night."

Half an hour later the shadower went down the broad steps of the mansion and turned his eyes at the window across the way.

He saw that the woman was a person past thirty, with a keen eye and cold, hard lines of feature.

When he reached the sidewalk he looked once more at the window, but the woman had disappeared as if she had finished her vigil.

Gideon smiled, but a mental note of this singular adventure was made. It might be a leader to a further quest.

CHAPTER II.

THE WOMAN ACROSS THE STREET.

GIDEON GRIP knew that the house he had just left would soon be filled by a startled and excited crowd.

He proceeded to his little den on a quiet street near Broadway, and shut the door after him.

When he had made a few notes which he thought best to transfer to paper instead of taxing his memory with them, he went down to a neighboring restaurant and took his coffee.

As yet he and Iris were the only possessors of the secret of Dorsey Drake's death, save, of course, the owner of the hand whose mark the girl declared she had seen on the dead face. He had admonished her to keep that discovery to herself, inasmuch as there were no traces of the hand to be seen on the white skin of the dead, and Iris had promised to obey him in every particular.

Gideon Grip knew but little of the life of Dorsey Drake. Indeed, few knew anything of it, for he was a man not accustomed to tell about himself, and those who knew him best seemed in fact to know the least of him.

The detective thought of many things over the steak and coffee of the little restaurant.

He had a table in one corner, and could think without being disturbed. When he had finished his breakfast, he went back to his room and resumed the thread of his speculations.

"Iris told me one thing that I must not forget. The dead man has had a visitor of whom she has seen but little. He came at night and went away before dawn. But we wasn't there last night, so she says, for she always heard him come and go."

In another moment footsteps came up the stairs just outside the detective's door and a rap sounded there.

Gideon crossed the room and opened the portal.

He started in spite of himself. If he had tried to keep cool, and he had a wonderful control over his nerves, he would have failed for before him stood the woman he had lately seen at the window across the street from Iris's home.

She was dressed in black which fitted her well-shaped figure to a nicety, and for a moment the ferret looked at her with an eye full of impertinence.

"Come in," he said at last, and when she had entered he shut the door behind her.

Gideon waved his visitor to a chair which she accepted, all the time looking at him and on the eve of speaking, though, as yet, she had not opened her mouth.

"To whom am I indebted for this morning visit?" said the detective.

"To Miriam Marx, the person who occupies rooms across from Dorsey Drake's residence. I thought I might be in possession of information of importance to you."

"To me?"

"To you, Mr. Grip. You are a detective and I saw something last night which I believe you should know."

Then, she knew that Dorsey Drake was dead? This woman who had played watch-dog at the window on the opposite side of the street had seen something? And she had come to impart it to him after having watched the house of the dead man for six months, as Iris had told him.

"I am always ready to listen to anything that helps me to unravel the mysterious," he said.

"It is mysterious, then? It is a puzzle from the start, is it?" smiled the woman. "How did you find him? I did not go over, but from the incident of your coming out of the house at an early hour and what I saw last night, I know that the blow fell, and that the police of New York will have something to do again."

Gideon Grip was eying the speaker as he seldom looked at woman.

"What did you see last night?" he asked bluntly.

"It was eleven o'clock and I was at my window," she replied. "Did the girl, Iris, tell you that I have been at that window watching them for the last six months?"

"She could not help observing you."

"He saw me, too. I have seen him looking across the street at me many a time. Well, as I was saying, I was at the window when the door was opened. It was eleven o'clock and I saw a man come out of that house. You may know that the lamp is on my side of the street and near the house I occupy. At night its light falls upon the front of Dorsey Drake's house and I could see the man very plainly. He carried a small valise in his left hand. It was but little larger than a lady's hand-bag, and from what I could see of it, its color was yellowish. The man stood on the step a moment and then walked off, showing me his figure to advantage for almost half a square."

"What was he like?"

"He was about your size, perhaps a little slimmer than you in build, and had the carriage of a gentleman. Though the night was not very cool, he wore a light drab overcoat and a soft hat such as is the style now. There was nothing striking about him, nothing in his dress to distinguish him from thousands of other men in this city; but the fact that he came out of that house at that hour is something."

Gideon Grip thought so, too. He had not heard of this man before. Was he the visitor whom Dorsey Drake sometimes entertained at his home?

"If you have watched that house for six months, as you say you have, is that the first time you ever saw that man come out?" he asked Miriam Marx.

"The first time," was the reply which startled him a little.

"Did Dorsey Drake have no night callers?"

"Not many, but he had one who came at long intervals, but it was not that man."

"You are sure of this?"

"I am. What are my eyes for?"

The black eyes of the woman were good for something as the detective had thought before that, and while she talked they seemed to sparkle.

"I never saw that man come out of that house before," she went on with a positiveness that carried conviction with it. "I have been watching that house for a long time—"

"It interested you, then?"

"Yes, the house and its occupant did. What did you find there this morning, Gideon Grip?"

"I found the man dead."

"How did the girl take it?"

There was in the tones of the woman an eagerness which could not escape the detective.

"She bore up well under the blow. Iris, despite her sex, has nerves of steel."

"She may need them before it is over," exclaimed the woman across the street.

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind. What are you a detective for?" she laughed. "Iris sent for you before she sent for any one else?"

"Yes."

"How considerate. Do you know anything about the past life of the dead man?"

"Not much—not as much as you know, perhaps."

"As I know? How absurd!" smiled the woman across the street, withdrawing and measuring with her eye the distance between her and the door.

"A woman who has watched a house for six months ought to know something about its inmates."

She felt the penetrating eye of the city ferret upon her, and saw that she could not escape its look.

"He was a singular man. He dabbled in chemicals; he had a room full of things which the common world don't know anything about. He spent a good deal of time playing with mystery; he was a learned man, if he did once fail to win a game which he could have had by throwing down a card which looked him squarely in his face. This man went from whim to whim; he knew a good deal about the mysteries of science, but, like many a fool before him, he sought for the impossible."

"What was that?"

"The elixir of life. He had in his possession five books, which were written years and years ago, by a fool who hunted for the same secret before him. It took him twenty years to get four of the books, but the fifth baffled his skill until six months ago. He thought the secret sought for was concealed in that fifth book. It was worth more than all the rest combined. He would have sweat blood for that last volume. It cost him a great amount of money, but he found it at last, I tell you. He had them all, perhaps up to the time of his death. Did you ask Iris if she knew where he kept them?"

Gideon Grip's look told that he had not, for he knew nothing of the existence of those five books of the dark and mysterious; but he would know at once.

He saw Miriam Marx lay one hand on the door, and looking once more into her face, saw it suddenly grow darker than ever.

"I won't say that we won't come together

again," she said, "for it is more than likely that we will see more than we want to of one another before you are at the end of your trail. Good-morning, Gideon Grip."

He would have detained her, but the door shut suddenly in his face, and the next moment he heard her feet on the stair—as she went down to the street below.

The air she left behind seemed impregnated with a new mystery connected with the death of the amateur chemist, and Iris Norman's guardian. He sprang to the window and saw her for half a second on the pavement, then her figure vanished, and she was lost in the crowd.

The sun rose higher and higher, and the city was getting the first rumors of what was to become one of the greatest mysteries of the day. The police and the reporter had found their way to Dorsey Drake's house, and the doctor had looked into the case as far as he could without using the scalpel. That was expected to solve the enigma of the man's death, though the vial with the strange odor was almost proof conclusive that one of the deadliest poisons known to man had terminated the life of the recluse.

It was verging onto night when the detective found himself once more in the house of mystery.

The lights were turned low, lending an air of intense mystery to the place, and Iris came toward the detective like a shadow creeping from a tomb.

"They are going to call it suicide, but you must not forget the mark of the fatal hand," said she, looking up into his face while her voice dropped to whispers.

"What do you know about the strange books that cost him so much?—the five volumes, Iris?"

"Who told you about them?" she said, with a start. "He showed them to me but once, and that was yesterday. Come; I will show you where they are."

She led the ferret into the room where he had seen the dead man at the table. Raising her hand, she touched a certain spot on the wall and a door, until then unseen, flew open.

"There they are. Look! He and I were the only custodians of the secret of this door in the wall. Those books—"

Iris stopped and leaned toward the niche in the wall. Her face was the hue of death.

"Merciful heavens!" she shrieked. "The fifth and last volume—the most important one of all—is gone!"

CHAPTER III.

THE TRANSFORMATION.

THE Secret Shadower of Gotham found himself at Iris's side staring at the niche which, as he could see with half an eye, contained but four books.

They were rough-looking tomes, bound in moth-eaten sheep, and so dilapidated as to fall apart, it seemed, at the slightest touch.

"The other one was here yesterday as late as five in the afternoon," said Iris. "He called me into the room, being in a better mood than I had seen him for weeks, and showed me the books, saying that the last one, the one missing now, had cost him many a sleepless night, but that it had paid for itself. He said, too, that it held the secret of human existence, that its contents solved the mystery of life and death, and that, with it in one's possession, there need be no death in this house. But it is gone, and the hand whose mark I saw on his face carried it off."

The detective could not help looking at the speaker who uttered these words with the air of one who believed every one.

"Do you say, Iris, that you shared with him the secret of this hidden niche?" asked Gideon Grip.

"He told me that I was the only sharer of it. You saw how I touched the button which opened the secret book-shelf—"

"Did he teach you how to find it?"

"He did. He said that some time I might want to find this hole in the wall, and that he would let me into the secret."

As Iris spoke the detective reached out a hand and took up one of the books.

"Those books are Greek to all but those who possess the key that unlocks them," said Iris.

Gideon opened the volume and smiled at the strange characters in which it was written.

"What language is this?" he asked.

"He never told me. It doesn't seem to be a language at all, but a cipher."

"All of these books are written in the same, then."

"The fifth and last volume was in another cipher," put in Iris. "I have seen him bending over it night after night and he used to go to his room pale and hollow-eyed. The work of deciphering that book seemed to make him sweat blood."

"Have you looked elsewhere for another hidden niche?"

"What is the use of doing so? There is no other. The book which contained the formula of the elixir of life has been stolen. The murderer carried it off."

Iris touched the button and the door flew back into its place, leaving no clew of its existence in sight.

"Have you seen the woman across the street to-day, Iris?"

"The window occupied so long is untenanted now," was the reply. "She watched till the blow fell and then her work was done."

"Do you believe she was in the plot?"

"What has become of her if she was not?" and Iris fell back and stared at the detective.

"The marks of the hand have not reappeared on the face, I presume?"

"No, though I have watched for them with a sleepless eye. You may think it all a delusion, but I saw the finger marks on the face as if a hand had been held over his mouth while he was dying."

"How came he to possess himself of the idea of an elixir of life? Why did he want to live forever?"

The tall figure of the beautiful girl straightened until it seemed to have gained an inch in stature.

"That was another secret of his—one he never shared with me," she replied.

"If he had enemies—"

"What was that?" suddenly whispered Iris, looking toward the room in which the body of Dorsey Drake lay with everything darkened around it. "Have the doctors come back?"

"Were they to come to-day?"

"This evening," she whispered, "but they could not get into the house without my knowledge."

The young girl glided across the soft carpet and opened the door without a sound. Gideon Grip was at her heels and looked over her shoulder.

The apartment beyond was the abode of shadows and Iris, standing on the threshold, looked forward with all eyes.

"Throw back the curtains—quick!" she cried and that instant the hand of the ferret carried out her wish.

A flood of light streamed into the room revealing the sheeted figure on the bed, and Iris covered the distance that intervened between it and herself with a single bound.

"Some one was in here!" she exclaimed, pointing at some disarranged drapery about the body. "See how this sheet was hastily dropped and how it fell from some startled hand."

Gideon Grip looked and in his soul acknowledged the truth of the girl's discovery.

But what had become of the intruder? Iris looked everywhere, her eyes taking in the whole length and breadth of the apartment, but without success.

"We heard no door shut," she said. "There was no sound of a person's vanishment. I heard a sound while we were in the other room—"

"What was it like, Iris?"

"It was a voice and it was in this room."

Iris turned to the window and threw back both curtains which act made the room almost as light as day. Every nook of the handsome chamber stood revealed; every corner was made light.

The detective looked at the young girl with a puzzled expression on his face.

Was the girl deceiving him, or had the tragic turn of events taken away her reason?

"There are no secret stairways in this house, Iris?" he asked.

She gave him a strange look in return and then went to one of the walls and began to sound it.

"We ought to be able to find it if one is connected with this chamber," she said at last. "There can be nothing of the kind connected with this room. But, as I live, I heard a human voice in this chamber awhile ago."

By and by the heavy curtains dropped back to their places and Iris, taking a last survey of the scene, withdrew with Gideon Grip.

When they passed back into the chamber where the mystery had had birth, he noticed that she had recovered her self-possession and touching him on the arm, she said:

"Don't tell on me, Gideon Grip. I may have been mistaken after all. You know what I am passing through, and, then, there may be a greater ordeal in store for me."

He looked down into the face upturned to him and said to himself:

"Is this young creature deceiving me? If she is I will not let her baffle me, for I am going to the end of this dark crime. I am bound to get at the bottom of this mystery of magic and murder."

Iris found herself alone when she had dismissed the detective and gliding to a distant part of the large house unlocked a door and after crossing the threshold closed and locked the portal behind her.

She was in a room rather large with a high ceiling, and, for a chamber in an American house, strangely furnished.

Everything denoted Asiatic life. There were tiger rugs on the floor, the head of a Bengal tiger looked down at her from a mantle carved with the faces and grotesque figures of Indian deities and the whole atmosphere of the place was oriental and sensuous.

Iris paused for a little while in the middle of this chamber and her eyes took in the garniture as though she were proud of it.

"They would never look for me here," she

said, bursting out into a laugh. "That shrewd detective would not look for Asia in the heart of New York. I have deceived him completely, and he is off looking for the trail of the mysterious. Gideon Grip is cool and level-headed; he can follow a scent when one is found, and, then, he has what I like—a heart that keeps its own secrets."

Iris seated herself at a table in whose polished surface of ebony was reflected her face, and drew a piece of note-paper from a secret drawer.

"I wonder if they will come to-night?" she said, aloud. "They said they would be here when the end came and it is here. The woman who watched at the window across the street must have told them this, and they will come."

She wrote a few moments, sealed the letter with a waxen seal and hid it in her bosom.

The heads of the Indian gods seemed to approach her when she turned and gazed at them. The dark faces grinned with all the devilishness of demons and Iris returned the grin with a fearless laugh.

"If he hunted for the elixir of life he never found it," she said. "He missed what I have found, with but one-half the work. I have here the wisdom of the secret-keepers of Benares—I hold in my hand the charm that for years baffled the priests of the Indian gods."

Something glittered in her white palm, a tiny vial which she clasped as Dorsey Drake would have clasped the long sought after elixir, and rising she stood before a mirror which revealed the whole of her faultless figure.

What would Gideon Grip the Secret Shadower have said if he could have looked into that room at that moment? What would he have done if he could have seen Iris, after looking at the vial for a moment with blazing eyes, drink off its almost colorless contents and then, for a moment, close her mouth and hold one of her hands over it with all her strength.

The draught seemed to produce no effect at first, but suddenly the color came back to the young girl's cheeks and she seemed another person. Her skin darkened. She leaned toward the mirror and watched the wonderful transformation until her flesh was the color of that of the Parsee woman, and her hair, suddenly disarranged, fell in long strands almost to the floor.

"It works like a charm!" she laughed to herself. "The sharp-eyed ferret would not recognize me now. He might look a year and would not call me Iris. I shall see what they want with me. I shall go to them and do the bidding of the Silent Circle."

She gathered up her hair and gliding across the room, touched a hidden button in the wall, passed out through a secret door and vanished.

On a small table in a room through which she passed she left the letter with the waxen seal and that was the last of her.

After awhile a maid—Zuleika by name, and dark of face, but with cold, gray eyes of steel—came in and spied the letter.

She picked it up and held it for a moment between her and the light. Then she melted the wax and opened it, and with bated breath read the contents while her bosom heaved and her eyes seemed to flash.

Having read the letter, Zuleika resealed it so well that no one would have thought that it had been tampered with, and slipping into the street dropped it into the first letter-box she found and went back into the house.

But Iris was not there. The transformed girl—the beautiful mystery of the house of crime—was no longer beneath the roof where so much was dark.

CHAPTER IV.

MIRIAM MARX TURNS TIGRESS.

If Gideon Grip, the detective, could have transported himself to a certain part of the great city and unlocked the front door of a house that did not look much unlike some of its neighbors, he might have come face to face with a person whose features were not altogether strange to him.

He would have seen in a small room which was guarded from the intruder's eye by heavy curtains, "the Woman Across the Street," as he had already come to know Miriam Marx.

She was quite alone and the hour was verging onto nine the same night of Iris's startling metamorphosis in the house of crime and mystery.

Miriam Marx did not look much unlike other women of her years of which she might have seen forty. She had a well-formed figure which indicated wiriness and strength and her skin was dark, but not dark enough to have entitled her to the distinction of being called an Asiatic.

Miriam Marx reclined in a chair which was filled by her figure, and her eye rested on a door which seemed to open into the street when, in fact, it only led the way to an adjoining room.

She played with a queer-shaped bracelet which she had slipped from her wrist—a bracelet whose setting, or coronet, was the head of a serpent with green eyes of turquoise.

"It is time and yet he doesn't come," she said, impatiently.

Was she waiting for the man of trails?

No, she had no engagement with Gideon Grip, the ferret, though she had told him on parting that they were likely to meet again, which was prophecy.

Presently the door which she had watched so long opened slowly and a face appeared.

A smile of pleasure passed over the woman's face and she waited for the owner of the face to come in.

The person who entered the room was a man who glided rather than walked and his slipping feet made no noise as he came on.

He was past fifty and his figure was lank and willowy. He was not an American and though one studied him for hours the puzzle of his nativity would have been a puzzle still.

He wore on his head a singular cap which was a mixture between a fez and a common rimless head covering, and when he came toward Miriam, who all the time watched him like a hawk, he grinned but once and then for half a second.

"What do you know?" asked Miriam.

"Not much," was the reply.

"Then I can tell you something. I have left my window."

"For good?" queried the man, whose voice was harsh and drawling.

"What is there for me to do any more?" was the reply. "Haven't I watched the house for six months with the care that a vulture watches the dying man in the desert? I think I have carried out my part of the programme. You don't want me to go back, do you?"

The snaky eyes in the head before her seemed to glitter.

"You watched till he died?" said the man.

"That ended my vigil," said Miriam, laughing.

"Yes. I kept a good lookout and saw all there was to see from the outside."

"Well?"

"I saw the man come out of the house after the crime."

"How do you know after the crime?"

The speaker was leaning toward Miriam, his eyes riveted upon her and his whole frame keyed up to a dangerous tension.

"Of course I wasn't inside. I didn't go over and see what took place there. I only watched the nest from across the street and I was to do no more."

"You have done well, child of the Silent Circle," said the man. "I will see that you are rewarded."

"What is to be done next?"

A long pause followed this query. Miriam thought she saw a change come into the eyes of the man and one of his hands was lifted until it was fairly outstretched.

"Beyond that door is more work for you," he replied. "The work of the Silent Circle begins where the Hand left off in the house of the American nabob."

Miriam made no reply.

"You are to watch again," was the countenance. "You are to go back to the trail where you left it. You are not to sit at the window day and night, but you are to cross the street and enter the house."

"The house where the young girl is?"

Miriam seemed to shudder when she put the question.

"Even there," said the Unknown. "You must cross that threshold with your keen eyes and still tongue."

The woman in the chair must have wondered what the man would have said if he could have known that she had sought out the detective and told him so much.

"When shall I begin?" she went on.

"Now. I know you have watched six months at one window, but you have no need of rest. Watching is rest. Child of the Silent Circle, I send you to the new work."

Miriam Marx arose, and for a moment stood erect before the dark-faced personage.

"While I am doing this, you must be careful that the Hand don't get the better of you," she said. "Have you thought that the death of the man of two lives may set the trail-dogs of the city on the track of the slayer?"

A contemptuous wave of the hand was the reply she got.

"You must not underrate these detectives," pursued the woman. "You must think of them as you play your hand. They are already on the alert. They are looking for the Hand and the chances are that some of them will find it."

"Before we have played our last card?" cried the other. "Pshaw! I know these bloodhounds of America. I know how they hunt and where to look for their shadow."

There was no reply.

"I leave the task of getting into the house to yourself," he continued. "You must go thither; you must cross as soon as possible the threshold which is so dangerous to you, and besides using the eyes which you have used so well you must be ready to use your hands."

"Not to kill?" said Miriam with another shudder.

"By no means, but to take. The secrets of that house must become known to you. You shall possess yourself of them all. Go, and may success reward you."

The man turned away, but the figure standing in the middle of the room did not stir.

"After this, what?" cried Miriam. "I want to know how long I am to play for you—how long I am to be the spy of the Silent Circle."

The gliding form stopped and turned upon her. The eyes seemed to look her through, and the finger, suddenly outstretched, pointed at one of the bare white walls of the room and the lips scarcely moving said:

"Read your answer there, Child of the Circle!"

Miriam looked at the wall, and saw suddenly grow into life there letters that seemed traced in phosphorescent fire.

Her nerves were all a-tingle as she leaned forward with not a vestige of color on her face and read:

"Once in the Silent Circle always there! The foot that turns back becomes the foot of the dead!"

She glued, her lips together while she read the sentences and when she had finished the last one, she turned toward the man, but he was gone and she was the sole occupant of the chamber.

"Merciful God! that means that I am in the meshes of the accursed Circle for life!" she exclaimed. "I am in the toils of the secret league, and what I have done already—my visit to the detective—is enough to condemn me to death."

She said no more, but watched the letters fade away on the wall and when the last had disappeared she turned toward the door and crept from the room.

In the hall she stopped and cast a look at the portal she had just shut.

"I am to enter the house I have watched so long," she said to herself. "I am to become the young girl's companion—to lean over her when she sleeps to see if she doesn't betray the secret in her dreams, to shadow her all the time; in short, to place my life in danger every hour of the day and night, and why? That I may wrest from the lips of a girl the darkest secret a heart ever held and, in the end, to see her perish without hope or friends."

For a moment Miriam seemed on the eve of breaking the bonds that bound her to the dread cabal, but something held her back and she rushed out of the house into the night.

She appeared to fear the very shadows of the street, but after awhile she regained her composure as if she had swallowed a draught that had given her nerves of steel.

It would have been hard for one to have thought that the Miriam of the street was the Miriam who a few minutes ago was trembling at the writing on the wall; but she was calm now; she was ready for the task before her.

She went back to the room where she had watched so long and so well.

When she found herself in the little chamber she threw herself into the chair by the window and looked across the street.

The light of the lamp beneath her fell upon the brown stones of the Drake mansion, but the shutters were drawn and the silence which she knew was of death had settled over the crime and its victim.

All at once Miriam drew back, but with her eyes fixed upon the house.

The front door had opened and in it stood a person who caught the full benefit of her scrutiny.

"The same man!" she said, sending out the words from between lips which did not seem to move at all.

There was no mistaking him; she had seen him before, and had told Gideon Grip how he looked when he came down the steps the night Dorsey Drake furnished New York with its latest mystery.

Now, there he was again, the same man, but this time the little valise was not in his hand.

Miriam, scarcely breathing, watched him with all eyes.

She saw him pass down the street, and watched him out of sight as she had done before.

Suddenly an idea entered her head.

Why not follow him?

For the Child of the Silent Circle to think was to act, and springing to the bed, she caught up her hat with that intention.

But at that moment she heard a step on the pavement below.

The night was still, and the sound came up to her through the open window.

Miriam looked out in time to see a figure enter the very house where she was. Though she caught but a momentary glimpse of the figure, it was enough to thrill every nerve.

The Man of the Valise was in the house!

At the same time she heard footsteps on the stairs, and flinging down her hat, she extinguished the light, and stood breathless in the middle of the room, with the mien of a cornered tigress.

CHAPTER V.

DETECTIVE LUCK.

To a part of this play the shadower of Gotham was a witness.

Gideon Grip, with the pertinacity of a trail-dog that lets nothing get away from him, was on guard when Miriam returned to the house at whose window she had watched so long.

Miriam had seen nothing of him, perhaps be-

cause she did not think of looking for him on the ground, but he was there with his keen eye, and he had seen the man emerge from the house of the dead, and had followed him with his eye while he walked off.

But he did not see Miriam standing in the middle of the floor, waiting with the air of a cornered tigress for him, with something along her arm—something that would have glittered like polished steel, if there had been light enough.

The Woman Across the Street waited some time, but the door of her room did not open.

She even wanted the man to come in. There was on her face an expression which boded him no good, but he did not come, and by and by she thought she heard footsteps going back down the stairs.

"Why didn't he come in?" she asked herself. "Was he afraid, or was it only a little spying trip of his own? He thinks he will come again, perhaps, seeing that I have been making this house my home; but he may find the nest empty."

She was at the window, standing there so as to shield her body while she looked down into the street.

Breathlessly she waited for the invader of the house and at last he came out and moved off again.

Once he glanced up, as if to note whether or not the window was occupied, but not seeing Miriam he lowered his head again and moved on.

The man on watch all this time now took up the trail.

Gideon Grip saw the person come out of Miriam's house and in a moment he was at his heels, but with some yards between them.

This was the man he wanted most to follow. He had no doubt he was the Man with the Valise whom Miriam saw come out of the mansion the night of the crime, and eager to pick up the first link in the chain of mystery, the detective resolved to let nothing baffle him on the trail he had struck.

For some time nothing occurred to break the trail. The suspected person led Gideon a long chase and at last turned into a remarkably quiet street for that hour and with a pass-key unlocked a front door and vanished.

"Is that the nest of the night hawk?" the ferret asked himself. "Is it possible that I have run him down so soon? Hello!"

The door had opened again and quite a different man came out.

Gideon looked at him a moment and was on the eve of letting him move off unfollowed when the sight of a gloved hand which came into view at the last minute, attracted him.

"In other feathers, ha?" cried the detective. "You have simply played another card and here we go once more."

Dogged by the ferret who never let any one escape him when once sighted, the man moved off apparently unconscious of the espionage. He walked at a leisurely gait and did not give the detective much trouble.

Half way across the city he led Gideon Grip. When he paused again Gideon saw before him a queer-looking house with tightly-drawn shutters and standing in an air of mystery.

It had for its nearest neighbor another odd looking building and the two houses were as queer looking as any in that quarter.

The detective had heard of them before. He knew that they had many years before been erected by an eccentric individual and that it was said that strange rites had been held in them. Their builder and first owner had spent many years of his life among the Hindoos and it was rumored that he, though not of Indian birth, had been a priest in the mystic temples of the Hindoos and that when he died the houses had fallen into the hands of the strange sect to which he belonged.

The detective could not help knowing this story which was current everywhere. Some unknown hand paid the taxes on the houses and it was not known to whom they really belonged. All was mystery about them, and what puzzled the detective was that he had tracked the Man with the Valise to one of them.

The door seemed to open without effort on the part of the man he had dogged.

When he vanished inside, the ferret stopped and gazed at the closed portal that shut out so much that was dark and unexplainable.

The nearest street-lamp threw but little of its glare on the two dwellings. He could see that the shutters were closely drawn, but not unlike those of a score of other houses in the vicinity, and when he moved past them, but on the opposite side of the street, he looked across, wondering what lay beyond the closed door.

By and by the ferret of New York drew nearer to the suspected house. He passed it just like an ordinary pedestrian, but at the same time he looked at the number.

It was the first time he had been near the old house for years. He remembered having passed it once before, and to have seen over the door the grinning head of an Indian god in ebony.

He wondered if it had been removed, but no, it was there still, as though the house still remained the property of the mystic sect of the land of Vishnu.

"It may be the haunt of the stranglers," said Gideon to himself. "I have seen a good deal of strange death since I became man-hunter, and years ago it was said that the dark hands of the Thugs were at work in this city, but of late years we have heard nothing of them. Iris still maintains that she saw the print of a hand on the dead man's face, but the doctors have declared that he took his own life with a deadly poison which he discovered among his drugs."

What was beyond the door of that house at that hour? What was the man he had tracked doing there?

Gideon Grip was devising a plan by which he could break the spell that seemed to reign over the spot, and let himself into the secret he had trailed across the metropolis, when a figure brushed past him and ran up the steps of the house of mystery.

The detective looking at the flitting figure, saw it vanish beyond the door, but he was thrilled to his finger-ends.

"That person had the very form of Iris," he said. "She was enveloped in a shawl such as I am sure I saw in the house of the nabob. But what would the girl be doing here? What would bring her to this place? This thing gets deeper and darker."

He had seen the person vanish in the house, and was still staring at it, not very much like a cool-headed detective, when a footstep fell on his ear.

A lone man was coming toward him, and Gideon moved on once more.

"I say, stranger, if you aren't in a hurry, I would like to see you a moment."

Gideon Grip stopped and waited for the speaker to come up. In another moment they stood face to face, and near enough to the street-lamp to enable Gideon to look into the almost parchment-like skin of the person who had addressed him.

He was a man of his own age, not very tall, but remarkably wiry of figure, and with two little eyes set far back in his head.

"I don't know just where I am," said the stranger, coming up and looking at the detective, who was making a sweeping study of his face.

"You are in New York for one thing—"

"In New York?" and the man passed his hand before his face and seemed to recoil. "In the city of the Thugs?"

Gideon smiled.

"If you mean our own thugs who frequent our docks and waylay men after dark you are right. We have them here."

"In the name of all that's good, how long did the drug last?"

"The drug, man?"

He threw his hand to his face and Gideon thought he saw the eyes get a new light.

"Can we talk elsewhere than on the street?" he asked. "Do you live on this street?"

"I can find a secret spot if you want to talk," was the reply, and Gideon led his strange acquaintance to a little tap-room, the only one he knew in the vicinity and in a moment they were in a back room without fear of being disturbed.

With the man fairly in the light, Gideon saw that he was very dark of skin, but that he was an Englishman. He was well dressed though his clothes had seen much service and were frayed at the ends.

He looked for some time at the wine the detective had ordered, as if half afraid to drink a drop of it; but at last, seeing Gideon drink his, he put the glass to his lips and desperately gulped it all down.

"As I live, I came here in a dream or under a spell—I can't tell which," he went on, his cheeks getting new color under the influence of the wine. "I have been walking in my sleep, but all the time guided by a hand that seemed to burn into my flesh and sear my bones. When I saw you awhile ago on the street the spell seemed to vanish and my eyes were opened. I did not know the city—everything was strange to me and instead of the temples of India I saw houses quite unlike those of Benares."

The Gotham detective listened with an incredulous stare. Was the man mad, or was it some trick with the man he had tracked from Dorsey Drake's house at the bottom of it?

"You don't believe me, I see?" the stranger went on, looking at the bottle on the table and seeming to regret that it was empty. "I shan't ask you to. What are you? What do you do in this city? Do you know where everybody lives? I would like to find—no, I can't say that it would be very good for me after coming hither against the oath I took, but still—My God! what was that? The step of the velvet-footed Thugs of the East?"

The man had sprung up, almost overturning his chair, and the detective saw horror depicted on his face while his eyes seemed ready to fly from his head.

"Who are you anyhow?" asked the detective.

"I am, or was—for the infernal drug seems to have made another man of me—to have given me another soul—Captain Derrick of the English Army. I went to India years ago and grew up under the curse of the Hand."

"What is that?"

The man came back to the table and putting his dark-like skeleton, hands upon it leaned over toward the detective.

"I can't tell you that. I will give nothing away until I find a detective. You have them here as we have in my native country. I want vengeance, but how is one to get it when he is hemmed in by the Black Hands, hands that, for some time after they have killed their victim, leave their accursed mark on the body!"

A thrill went through the man who listened. He thought of the mark Iris professed to have seen on the face of Dorsey Drake.

"How long does that mark remain?"

"What, have you seen it in this city?" asked the Englishman.

"It has been seen."

"Then, they are here—then, the Black Hands are still near me and the drug under whose spell I have lived for months has brought me again in the shadow of death."

He stepped toward the door and was about to open it when the detective rose and grasped his arm.

"You want a detective, do you?" he said. "I am one."

"You? Who are you?"

"Gideon Grip."

"Then you are the man I want," and he came back and took a seat at the table.

CHAPTER VI.

THE VICTIM'S STORY.

"Do you want more wine?" asked Gideon, seeing the man eyeing the bottle.

"If you please."

When the new bottle came and captain Derrick had helped himself, which he did with the manner of a man who was nearly dead of thirst, he lay back in the chair a moment with closed eyes.

"You won't believe my story; I know you won't!" he said.

"Go on and try me."

"I don't intend to begin at the beginning of my life for that would be going too far back and the start of my existence has nothing to do with the story in hand. I became an officer in the Queen's Guards which went out shortly after the Sepoy Rebellion, but too late to see any service therein. I had always had a desire to see the Indian temples and to meet the strange people there, and that is what got me into the Guards, for if the regiment had not been ordered to India I would have kept out of it."

"Garrison life was dull enough for years and I was on the eve of resigning and returning home when I fell in with the bane of my life. You think, perhaps, that I came across one of those rascally people who belong to the secret orders of India, but such is not the case. I made the acquaintance of an American, a young man of my own age. He had come to India with a set purpose—with the intention of theft. He had heard somewhere of the strange books which were said to have been hidden years and years before by an old man who had discovered the elixir of life and he wanted those books."

"Did they ever exist?" asked the detective.

"I don't know. I have always thought the whole thing was a hoax like other things said to have existed in that land of mystery, and the strangling cord; but anyhow this American induced me to go in with him in the hunt for those books. We haunted the old temples of India, we hunted everywhere, tried to bribe the priests, sought out every trail that promised to give us a clew until one day my friend vanished. He literally disappeared like smoke vanishes in the sky—that is I saw him one moment and the next he was gone. It was in an old temple which had been a ruin for centuries. We had gone to it to follow up a clew which he said he had obtained, and were in one of the underground cells which the priests had inhabited at one time, and I was about to speak to him when I discovered that I was the only tenant of the place. He was gone, and from that day to this the mystery of his vanishing is as dark as ever."

Derrick paused and gulped down another glass of wine.

"Well, I went back without him, but from that day I was watched. I can't tell you of all the times when I discovered that I was watched by the shadows of the Indian priesthood. You have heard a good deal of the Thugs, you have heard how they strangle people with their cords; but they did not attempt to strangle me. I continued to serve the queen, but life was no longer what it had been. I finally fell into the company of a native who professed to be my friend, but he wove round me a coil from which there was no escape. I became a member of the Mystic Tie—I was taken into the first court, as they call it, and found there other members of the regiment. We were under a spell which had been thrown round us by the power of the men who deal in the strange drugs and incantations of the East. Once there always there. I lived from the day I lost my companion a new life. I was no longer Captain Derrick, though I tried hard to break the spell of infernal power."

"More than once we tried to break away from the hands of our enslavers. We could plan and see how to get away, but we were deep in the spell and escape was impossible. I was initiated

into some of the dark rites of the brotherhood, but there were a thousand-and-one secrets which were sedulously kept from me. Years passed—they did not seem years though I now know they were—and I was living a life which was a double one. I threw up my commission at last and haunted the old temples of Benares. I am aware that I was an object of pity by my former friends—that I was pointed out to tourists as the slave of the Thugs; but I could not break the spell. The fate of my friend haunted me. If we had not looked for those mystic books which, after all may have no existence in fact, all might have been well; but we went too far and fell under the ban of the Black Hands.

"There came a time when the spell seemed to lift and set me free. I went to England, but I was followed. The same footstep which I have heard all through those years of mystery and torture followed me and I heard it at my door at night and when I looked lo! there was nothing outside. I drifted back to India for I had heard while there that the person in the power of the Black Hands has but one way of escape. If he invades the inner temple of the goddess Vishkar and all alone plucks from her bosom a strange stone that glitters there, the spell is withdrawn and he is free. But the danger that besets the fool who attempts this robbery are enough to keep him back; still, I resolved to tempt them all.

"I seemed a free man, with all my senses to plan and execute while on my way back to India. I landed at Benares one summer day and thought myself unseen. I knew where the temple was, having passed its threshold many times and went thither at once, sworn to accomplish my resolution. None of my old companions seemed to know me. I was not the man who had sailed away hoping to escape the following feet of the sworn spies of the East; I was Captain Charles Derrick once more, with nothing between him and future happiness but a stone in the bosom of a pulseless idol. I found my way to the temple of the forbidden goddess. I knew the interior of the place for I had been there before, though in a half dream state. I crossed the sacred threshold and was in the presence of Vishkar.

"All around me was the dead silence which makes the temples of the East so dreaded to Europeans. I heard the beating of my heart, but stilled it. The idol was before me and in the dim light that prevailed I crept toward the altar, seeing nothing but the stone which had lured me from England. I stopped at the foot of the idol which stands on a raised dais guarded by a dozen grotesquely carved figures and collected all my courage. The chamber seemed uninhabited at that hour. I went on. I crept upon the platform and caught sight of the prize almost within my reach. What would I have given at that hour if I had never ventured back? What would I have bestowed upon the hand that could have seized me and held me back from that accursed mission? But it was too late. I sprang at the breast of the fatal goddess of the Hindoos; I gripped the stone and tried to tear it out, but instead, I was held fast as if an electric power had been thrown into the infernal gem and I was a prisoner in the temple of Vishkar.

"How long I hung there I cannot say. I know that the room grew dark and that the stone seemed a gem of blazing fire which was eating up my blood, yet the chamber was not lighted by the gleam of the gem. The stone in the breast of Vishkar was as immovable as the Sphinx. I lost all power of locomotion. I felt myself hanging limpid from the stone which had drawn me across the sea and waited for the next scene. It came when I was about to perish. The temple seemed suddenly lighted up with strange fire and I heard noises which seemed to emanate from the dark regions of the damned. I was surrounded by the priests of the temple. I was pulled from the stone which had caught me like the jaws of a steel-trap and hurried from the chamber. From that day my life was changed. I cannot trace it from that point until I found myself back in England and in the lodgings I had left to steal the gem from the idol's bosom. That it was not a dream, though it was wild enough to be such, my scarred hand told me. That I had crossed the sea and attempted the foolish theft, a newspaper told me, for it told how an ex-captain of the English Army had tried to deprive Vishkar of her mystic gem. I was that man. Though I was back in England, I still heard the velvet tread of the sleepless spy. I hardly knew what sort of life I led. I knew that I was a marked man and all because I tried with an American to steal the strange books which told how life may be prolonged in the East.

"One morning, driven by a fate which I had not been able to master, I went back to India for the third time. This time I was not eager to rob Vishkar, but I wanted to see who followed me. Returning to my old room in Benares I one morning took a drink which the servant brought me and unconsciousness came. When I came out from under the power of the spell I was in a strange place and wondered where I could be. It was not England, nor India, for the buildings were strange, and when I saw a man on the street ahead of me and

questioned him, he told me I had crossed the sea again and was in New York. Still, I could not believe and did not until I met you awhile ago and had the story confirmed."

The detective's companion took another drink and looked toward the door.

"If we stay here long enough the footstep will come to that portal," he said with a smile for a moment lighting up his sallow face. "They have kept after me for years and I am as much under the spell of that accursed espionage now as when I was under the suns of the East. You are a detective. I don't know you, but I have trusted you with a narrative which you may believe or reject just as you like."

"What about the Black Hands?" asked Gideon Grip. "Did you ever see the mark they leave on their victims?"

"I have seen it more than once. You may look at the dead face an hour and not see it, but all at once it appears and only when you stand in a certain light."

"What causes the mark to vanish and reappear?"

"That is one of the secrets of the order. The person who interferes with the order will feel, sooner or later, the hand of its strange death. In London one morning I was called to look at the face of a man found dead in the gutter. I saw the mark there, though no one else did. That man, as I afterward discovered, had been in India and the Black Hands had followed him. Let me tell you—no, let me show you the photograph of the friend I lost in the dark cells of the old temple. He gave it to me the day before we set out on the fatal trip and I have kept it through all my adventures."

Derrick unbuttoned his coat and ran his hand far beneath it. Presently he pulled out a picture which he handed across the table. The detective took it and leaned toward the light.

What made him start? Why did the picture though but glanced at nearly fall from his hand?

Captain Derrick looking at Gideon Grip saw his sudden start, and their eyes met when the city shadow looked up.

"This man was killed the other night," said the ferret.

"Killed the other night? He died years ago in India!"

"You don't know that he did. You only say that he vanished in the underground corridors of the ruined temple. I say he died here the other night. His ward saw on his face after he was dead the mark of the fatal fingers."

The look of Derrick was a stare.

"My God! it can't be; but why not?" he stood erect and was glaring at the ferret. "This life of mine has been a record of the strange and mysterious. You are a detective. Show me where this man died and tell me who he was. If what you say is true—if the mark was seen on his face—then the Black Hand is at work in this city. We will form a cabal against the Brotherhood of the Hand; we will fight the order that has enslaved me—fight it and die, ha! ha!"

Derrick sprang across the room as he finished, and, halting at the door, pointed toward the outer room and grinned.

"The velvet tread was there again!" he cried. "I heard the feet of the tracker—"

Gideon Grip sprang past him and opened the door.

Nothing confronted him—nothing but the face of Dorsey Drake in his hand.

CHAPTER VII.

STILL ON THE TRAIL.

FOUR days passed.

Not for a single hour had the sleepless detective been idle.

Gideon Grip had procured a quiet place for Captain Derrick, the tracked victim of the Black Hands, and had flattered himself that he had hidden the Englishman securely.

If the footstep had not been baffled, it had been turned aside for the time, for Derrick had told him that he had not heard it since taking the new quarters.

It seemed to the detective that a better color had come to the man's face, that his eye, for the first time in years, had gotten a hopeful light, and he said himself that he was almost sure of cheating the secret order out of another victim.

During the interval Gideon Grip had drawn from Derrick more of his story.

He told him more and more about the stranglers of India, and he was surer than before that Dorsey Drake had not taken his own life.

Gideon had been to the nabob's on several occasions, and talked with Iris, but the girl had heard no more strange sounds, and had nothing new to impart, only that she had a new maid, and when she appeared to Gideon Grip he saw that she was a commonplace looking woman, and did not dream that she was really Miriam in a new disguise.

Yes, the Woman Across the Street had obeyed the chief of the Silent Circle, and was an inmate of Iris's home.

The girl did not recognize in her the woman she had seen on watch at the window on the other side of the street, and Miriam was all the time on the alert for news.

Gideon Grip watched the two houses to which he had tracked the Man with the Valise, but had not seen him since.

He was quite sure he had not seen him for the last time, and Captain Derrick had told him that the Black Hands were supposed to have agents throughout the civilized world, so powerful was the Order of the Brotherhood.

During these days the detective made another and very interesting discovery.

Iris had a lover, a young man not at that time in the city, and Zuleika, her first maid, had told him enough to let him know that letters passed between them nearly every week.

He went down to Captain Derrick's room one night, and opened the door without knocking.

He found the victim of the Black Hands not alone, but in company of a man who looked curiously at him as he crossed the threshold.

"You are just in time to meet my friend, Paradox," smiled the Englishman. "This is Mr. Paradox, whom I once met in Benares, though I had almost forgotten him."

The man who bowed to the ferret was tall and good looking, with a full, black beard, inclined to curl.

"Heaven knows how he found me out," continued Derrick, "but he says he discovered me by accident and we have been recalling old times here."

Paradox had a keen eye and pleasant voice and the stories he told of India confirmed his assertion that he knew a good deal of the land of mystery.

He did not remain very long after the detective's arrival and the moment he had quitted the room Derrick sprang to Gideon Grip's side and clutched his arm.

"For God's sake, follow that man!" he cried in a hoarse whisper. "Don't let him elude you, but track him down."

"I thought he was an old acquaintance."

"I seemed to remember having met him in India when he had talked awhile, but you know I was under a spell half the time there. Somehow or other, I felt strangely all the time I was with him to-night and you must find out where he is putting up."

Derrick's eyes had an unnatural light and he almost pushed Gideon Grip out of the room.

A minute later the ferret stood on the pavement below looking after the man who had just slipped down-stairs.

Nothing was to be seen of Paradox.

Deeming it not wise to return to Derrick very soon with an adverse report, he went away.

Two hours later he came back and found the door locked.

"I have been found," said Derrick, looking at him with a blanched face. "The footstep came back awhile ago and I heard it at the door."

"Strange that it should so soon follow Paradox's visit."

There was no answer. Derrick stood at the table with his hands clinched and the nails sunk into the rigid palms.

"Did you track him down?"

"I did not see him after he quitted this house. He must have taken a passing car."

"The first failure," and Derrick shut his lips hard. "Look here, don't you know that this man is an impostor?"

"How an impostor?"

"I never knew him in the East. I have racked my brain trying to recall him, but I can't do it. It is impossible. I never knew Paul Paradox in India, though he mentioned some things which I remembered very well. He belongs to the Black Hands!"

The last words were spoken in a lowered tone and with the intonation of despair.

Derrick sunk into a chair and buried his face in the arms he threw before him on the table.

The light of the lamp fell upon him and revealed the trembling figure which the detective gazed at without a word.

"Mark me, there is no escape!" he cried, suddenly looking up and encountering the ferret's eye. "It will be there in the course of time," and he touched his cheek with his bronzed finger.

"Four days ago you thought you were safe here," said Gideon.

"So I did. It was the first gleam of sunshine my heart felt for lo! these many days. I thought I was safe. I cannot tell you how overjoyed I was. I seemed in the seventh heaven. Safe! What a word it was. Safe, after having been tracked all over the globe, after having heard behind you the footfall of the human tiger which spares no one. But now discovered."

He stood up and stretched out his hands.

"There are other hiding-places," said the detective. "This is not the only one in all this city."

Derrick looked incredulous.

"If Paradox belongs to the Black Hands and was their spy and not your friend, we will baffle him," he went on. "I am getting at this mystery of the avenue; I am going to find the hand that left its mark on Dorsey Drake's face, as seen by Iris."

"Did no one else see it?"

"No. She says she saw it, standing in a certain light, and though I stood in the same place, I could not see the fatal mark."

"That is the way with it," smiled the hunted man. "You may look at the victim's face ten thousand times and see nothing; then you may come again and look and lo! it will be there."

"What causes it?"

"I have told you that I don't know. The Mark of the Black Hand is dreaded in India as nothing else is. It is feared more than the cobra and pestilence."

Yet that night Derrick changed his quarters. He was taken to another part of the city where the detective flattered himself he could not be ferreted out and then left him, to go back to the trail, he said.

Gideon Grip went back to his own little room, but did not remain there long.

He had seen nothing of Miriam Marx since she had given him a clue to the man she had seen come out of Dorsey Drake's house the night of the murder.

The murder!

It would have been a strange term to have used in the presence of the police. They had taken the report of the doctors for the truth, and the newspapers had ceased to speculate why a man like Dorsey Drake should have taken his own life.

The presence of the wine glass on the table, the odor which arose from it, the fact that the man had made a study of chemistry and knew what was deadly and what was harmless—all these things went toward forming the verdict which the city had accepted, but which the detective and one or two others had thrown aside.

Gideon Grip had put this and that together and reached certain conclusions; he no longer doubted the existence of the Black Hands. Not because he had heard Derrick's story, but he believed that Iris had not been deluded, but had seen on the face of her guardian the mark of the Brotherhood.

Still there was one thing which was to the ferret a mystery as great almost as the blow which had stilled the nabob's life.

Of course he would like to have found the trail of the missing book of secrets, but he believed it would come to light at the end of the game; but he could not forget the female figure which he had seen glide up the steps of the old house, believed to have been the property of the Hindoo brotherhood in New York.

The shawl which covered the form had a look which startled him. He always went to Iris's home with his eyes open, and he almost believed that it was impossible for him to be mistaken.

Had Iris gone to that house? Was it her figure that he saw ascend the steps and vanish beyond the door, and if so, why had she gone thither?

Iris had given him the *entree* to her home at all hours. To do this she had furnished him with two pass-keys, one to the front and the other to the rear door, and on several occasions the detective had availed himself of the privilege.

When he had seen Derrick hidden in the new quarters, he went back to his own room, and thence to Iris's house.

Slipping to the rear of the large house, from the interior of which came just the faintest gleam of light, he opened the door with the pass-key and glided inside.

Gideon Grip had the nature of a leopard coupled with the courage of a lion.

He had come to that house as he had come to it before. The sounds which Iris averred she had heard within its walls puzzled him; and he could account for them in no other way than that the house had secret doors and stairways.

In the house the detective found himself amid silence and among shadows.

Everybody seemed asleep, and he stood for a moment at the head of the stairs leading up from the dead man's laboratory.

All at once a door below seemed to open with slight noise.

"Iris?" said the detective, leaning over the balustrade.

He looked down and saw there a figure, which stopped for a second at the foot of the flight, and then a face was upturned to him.

The light which always burned in the hall below fell upon the face while it screened him.

"That is the new maid," said Gideon Grip to himself.

The next moment she came up, and he shrunk into the nearest corner and hugged the wall.

He counted the footsteps on the stairs, and when he saw the face within three feet of him, a new light seemed to burst upon him.

"Great God!" he mentally exclaimed. "That is Miriam Marx. What is she doing in this house?"

In another instant the figure of the spy had vanished.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BLACK HAND'S MARK.

THE vanishing of the Woman Across the Street was a source of surprise to the keen-eyed ferret.

He did not hear the opening or closing of a

door, but Miriam had disappeared all the same, and the wall where she had vanished seemed as solid as elsewhere.

Gideon crept to the spot and examined it in the light that dimly pervaded the upper corridor.

Miriam was beyond that wall, but what was she doing?

Suddenly he heard some one else on the stairs, and falling back to the convenient corner once more he waited for its maker to appear.

Presently there appeared at the top of the flight the head of a woman and then the slight, graceful body came into view.

It was Iris's figure, but not the girl's face.

She did not see the detective, but glided off, vanishing toward the girl's room and leaving in her wake another trail of mystery.

"That was Iris, yet it was not Iris," said Gideon to himself, as greatly nonplused as he had ever been. "She has the young girl's walk, but the face was almost as dark as an Indian's."

He hardly knew what to do under the strange circumstances, but after awhile he crept down the hall which the last person had traversed, and stopped at Iris's door.

A wild curiosity took possession of the detective's mind. He was quite sure the girl had entered the boudoir, there seemed no other place for her, yet he did not want to suspect such a fair young creature, and especially since she had been so open with him, telling him all she knew about the mystery and so on.

But the strange person must be beyond Iris's door. Who was she?

Gideon Grip would have carried his curiosity to the point of looking over the transom if he had not turned back and sprung toward the spot where he had seen Miriam disappear.

He was near the balustrade when he saw a door in the wall open and Miriam come out.

There was a gleam in the woman's eyes which the uncertain light could not keep from him.

She had done something to excite her blood, but what? Would it do for him to proclaim himself, to let her know that he knew that she was playing spy in the home of Iris? He hardly knew.

Once more Miriam passed him and went toward Iris's room.

Watching her like a hawk, the detective saw her stop at the door and apply one ear to the keyhole.

Miriam was an eavesdropper.

There was something in the sight of that woman listening at the chamber of the young girl that stirred Gideon's blood.

He would have gone toward her and made his presence known if at that moment she had not straightened and turned toward him.

Escape was now almost impossible.

Miriam seemed to see the figure standing among the shadows and Gideon thought he caught the look she gave him when he leaned forward and spoke her name.

She started toward him with her hand executing a quick sweep toward her bosom, but the following moment they stood face to face, Miriam showing by her look how startled she was.

"You are not watching at the window any more," said the detective. "On the contrary, you have transferred your scene of operations to the house itself."

She said nothing for a moment, but smiled.

"Why didn't you follow her, Miriam?" and he looked toward Iris's chamber.

"That was not my intention," was the reply.

"You mean not your orders."

She looked at him in a curious manner and then drew him nearer the top of the stairs.

"I don't think it necessary to try to hide anything from a man like you. I am tired of the slavery that manacles me. I want to escape, but how? Come with me. I want to show you something."

She led him to the wall where he had seen her disappear and touching a button which he would never have found, they passed into a narrow room which seemed to lie between others of better dimensions.

"You know this house pretty well, Miriam," said the detective.

"A spy has to know everything," was the answer.

She advanced to the nearest wall and opened a door which act disclosed a flight of steps almost too narrow to let a single person up and down.

"I haven't been in this house for nothing," said Miriam, looking into the ferret's face.

"I don't doubt that, Miriam."

They went down the stairs together, the woman in the advance, and a door opening below landed them in a room which the detective recognized at once.

They were in the chamber where Dorsey Drake had been found dead, and the door by which they had entered swung back, leaving no clue to its whereabouts.

"I wanted to show you this, that is all," said Miriam. "You are a detective and can draw your own conclusions."

She touched the button once more and they went back.

"Miriam, who sent you to this house?" asked

Gideon Grip when they were in the upper room again.

Miriam fell back with a slight cry and a white face.

"I dare not tell you," she said at last.

"You are a paid spy."

"Not a paid one. Don't say that. As I live, I am not to receive a dollar for this work."

"But you were sent hither?"

"Yes."

"By whom, Miriam?"

Once more she pushed him back, looking into his eyes with a shudder.

"What is your mission to this house?—to watch the young mistress whom you tracked to her door to-night?"

"I have a double mission in this house of secrets. I am to watch Iris and the other one."

"The other one, Miriam?"

"The double life, I mean."

The look of the detective almost became a stare. He recalled the person he had seen on the stairs, the one with Iris's figure, but not her face.

"You did not see Iris come up-stairs, did you, Miriam?"

"I did not; but I heard her."

"The girl seemed to make no noise at all."

"This room is the secret-finder of this house. One hears everything here. While you could not be heard beyond these walls, every sound reaches you here. Listen; there goes a door!"

The detective distinctly heard a door open and shut and turned again to Miriam.

"Miriam," he said, "the person who went toward Iris's room did not have her face. She had her figure, but not her features. They were as dark as an Asiatic's; but it was the girl's step she had."

He thought he detected a smile at the corner of Miriam Marx's mouth, but it vanished while he looked.

"Was that person Iris?"

"How should I know? I did not see her, you know."

"Who all inhabit this house?"

"There are Iris, Zuleika and myself."

"Has the Man with the Valise been back since the night you saw him come down the steps with the bundle in his hand?"

"You haven't forgotten him, I see," she exclaimed. That man is the mystery of the game. Gideon Grip, he is the dangerous feature of the whole puzzle."

"Then you believe that he knows how Dorsey Drake died?"

"Don't forget to ask him when you meet."

"Now come back with me to Iris," said the detective. "Her face was as dark almost as an Indian's, and while it did not resemble the one I have been accustomed to, it was Iris's, all but that. What is this mystery, Miriam?"

She was looking at him with no apparent intention of answering him and he clutched her arm.

"You must not forget that you came to me and told me about the Man with the Valise," he said. "You must not go back on your first zeal. You know more than you want to tell to-night. You have ferreted out some of the secrets of this house. Miriam, did you ever hear of Captain Derrick, late of the English Army?"

She actually staggered from him and threw her hands to her own mouth as if to keep back a cry of surprise.

"You have heard of him, which tells me that you know a good deal about what happened across the water in the land of the Hindoos. You say we can't be heard in this room. Miriam, you must tell me why you came hither—I care not whom you betray. I am after the hand that left its mark on the face of Dorsey Drake. Are you under the Black Hand?"

She seemed to quiver in his grip like one suddenly smitten by a chill and her face grew white.

"I am sworn," she cried. "You don't want to break the most terrible of oaths, do you?"

"I want the truth in the interest of justice."

"When I tell all I know, I am in the shadow of death."

"You need not keep in the way of those whom you have betrayed. You can hide in this city or go beyond it."

"You don't know the Silent Circle."

She seemed to regret having spoken those words, but they were beyond recall and she looked speechless into his face.

"Come back to-morrow night," she said.

"I want to complete a discovery."

"Will you be here, Miriam?"

"I will."

"And you will tell me all?"

"As I live I will give you a clue."

Gideon Grip slipped from the house of mysteries, and felt the cool wind of night on his cheeks.

"I will hunt up Derrick, and see that he is safe, before I go home," he muttered, taking a roundabout and shadowed route to the place where he had left the Englishman.

The detective entered the little house, and crept up the stairs leading to the man's room.

He knocked, but there was no response.

Waiting awhile he tried the door, and it swung open at his touch.

There was something startling even in this, something suspicious.

Gideon Grip slid into the room, and the next moment stumbled against something on the floor.

In another instant he had struck a light, and the moment the match flashed up he was horrified to see the figure of Captain Derrick, face up, on the carpet.

The Secret Shadower saw something else which startled him more than the staring, deathful eyes of the hunted man.

It was the print of a human hand on the ghastly face, and crying:

"The Black Fingers have found him!" he sprang up, dropping his match on the bosom of the dead.

For the first time in his life he saw the mark of the Black Hand, as Iris had seen it before him.

The detective did not remain long in the dark, but relighted his matches, and held a bunch close to the face on the floor.

"It is gone!" he said aloud. "I can't see it now!"

Sure enough the mark of the Black Hand had disappeared, and it mattered not how he held the light, he could not see it at all.

After awhile he turned on the gas, and viewed the body from every conceivable position, but always with the same unsatisfying results.

The mark of death was not to be seen any more.

Gideon Grip bent over the body and felt the pulse, but it was still. The heart had ceased to beat, and the same look of death which he had seen in Dorsey Drake's face, was present in Derrick's.

"The poor wretch was right—he was followed to his doom by the tiger tread of the spy of the Black Hands. He was an actor in the game I am ferreting out, though he came into it a little late. The Black Hand came while I was away. I wonder if he saw it before the blow fell? Ha, what is that? The mark again!"

The detective was looking down into the face of the dead man, for the hand had come back, and he now saw it on the white face, every finger revealed to the very tips; *but the thumb was but half a thumb!*

"That ought to be a clew!" cried he, and then looking again he saw no signs of the hand.

It had vanished as before, and he stood erect, with the little gas-jet showing him the end of the man hunted down without mercy.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MARK ON THE WALL.

GIDEON GRIP had but one clew to the identity of the man who had taken the life of Derrick the Englishman, and that was the mutilated thumb as shown in the mark of the deadly hand.

But he had seen it but once, and though he viewed the face from half a dozen standpoints it was not to be seen again, and he was forced to give it up.

The ferret wondered if the footsteps which had followed the doomed man so persistently for years would come back to see if his work was well done.

As he stood in the presence of the dead, he waited for the stealthy tread to creep up the steps outside, but it did not come, and he turned to other matters.

Slipping the bolt of the door into its place, he began to look over the effects left by the dead man.

They were not many, for Captain Derrick had very little property, nothing but a valise, an old leathern one, which was locked and thrown into one corner of the apartment.

It yielded to the detective's knife and a few papers fell out, but they were cuttings from English journals which referred to him when he was a favorite of the Guards, and had no assassin on his track.

Gideon Grip looked everywhere, and spent some time over the valise.

When he concluded his search he turned to the dead man and for the second time caught sight of the mark of the deadly hand.

"It is there again!" he cried, but the moment he sprang forward it vanished, leaving him to smile and to stare at the cold white face.

Half an hour later the Ferret of Gotham came down the stairs and passed out into the night.

No one followed him.

The dead man was the sole occupant of the little hiding-place which had turned out to be his last, and no one was the wiser for the silence that filled the room.

The detective turned up in another part of the city and found himself once more in the vicinity of the two houses said to be occupied by the disciples of India's gods, but all was still and he saw nothing that rendered him suspicious.

Did the trail of the Black Hand lead to that place?

The house to which he had tracked the Man with the Valise was the larger of the two, and he watched it more particularly.

The grinning deity over the door seemed to mock him, and he looked at it with eyes that almost flashed.

Gideon Grip wanted to get on the inside of that mysterious house, and the longer he looked

at it the more he wanted to pass its forbidden threshold.

All at once there appeared at one of the upper windows a light which attracted the ferret.

He stood like a statue in the shadow of the tree by which he had halted and watched.

Presently he caught sight of a figure as it flitted past the window, then it came back as before and he saw that it was a woman.

After awhile he saw it again and then, creeping nearer still, he looked with greater scrutiny and noticed that she had stopped, as if arranging her toilet by a mirror.

There was something familiar in the figure which he could not get out of his head.

He saw the shapely shoulders and the long, flowing hair which a pair of white hands bound up in the light.

All at once the man on guard saw the light vanish and the house was dark again.

"Will she come out?" he asked himself.

"Will she emerge from that house and give me a chance to see who inhabits it?"

He did not have to wait long, for the front door opened and a female tripped out.

Gideon Grip eyed the person like a hawk and when she moved away he was at her heels.

There was something almost cat-like in the movements of the woman as she glided off down the street with the man of shadows in her wake.

"Heavens!" she suddenly cried. "She has been stopped by some one."

It was true; the woman had been stopped by a man and the moment Gideon caught sight of him he knew that again he had seen the Man with the Valise.

They went off together, but separated some squares from where they had met and the detective kept on after the woman.

He tracked her half-way across the city.

He dogged her steps in light and shadow and to his astonishment the trail ended at the door of Iris's home!

The person so well tracked by the ferret took a pass-key from her pocket, opened the door and vanished.

Was it Iris?

Had he followed her from the house of secrets back to her own home, and what did she know about the Black Hand more than she had told him?

The mystery deepened.

"Not to-night," said Gideon, drawing back from the mansion. "I won't recross the threshold, but will leave the girl to her dreams for I certainly tracked her from the House of the Grinning God. To-morrow night I am to meet Miriam there and she may have news of to-night's work for me."

Once more he turned away and sought the room where he had left the dead man on the floor.

Gideon Grip climbed the stairs with misgivings and wondering if anything had taken place since his departure and opened the door which he had left unlocked.

The room was as still as death, and dark.

He struck a light and held it over his head as he looked downward at the carpet.

Captain Derrick, the victim of the Black Hands, had not been disturbed, but the valise which he had searched had not fared so well.

A glance at it told the ferret that the room had been visited since his departure, for it was not lying where he had left it and its contents which he had replaced had been inspected and some abstracted.

"If I had watched I might have seen the murderer," he thought. "I should have remained on guard and I would have caught the hand of death and destiny. But some other time," and he drew back, leaving the dead man to his repose on the floor.

He wondered who occupied the rest of the house. When he engaged the room for Derrick he remembered having seen a pale-faced woman and a little boy with curly hair who seemed to be her son.

Were they still in the house and had they heard the step of the slayer?

At the foot of the stair he halted and then turned to a door on his left.

The detective knocked and waited.

In a little while he received a response, and the following moment the door was opened and he stood face to face with the woman he had seen before.

She fell back at sight of the shadow and looking down, he saw the boy clinging to her skirts.

"Madame, have you heard anything to-night?" he asked.

She glanced furtively at the boy and shook her head.

"Nothing," she said.

"But, mamma, you know I heard something when I was awake and you said—"

"Hush, Ben. You were dreaming and not awake at all."

"But my eyes were wide open and I saw—"

"You saw nothing, child, and must not talk. This gentleman wants to see me, so go back to bed and go to sleep again."

The boy with an imploring look at the detective moved away, and Gideon Grip followed him with anxiety and eagerness.

"Madame, something has happened while you

slept," he went on. "There is a dead man up-stairs."

The woman shut her lips hard to keep from alarming the boy and gave Gideon a sharp, inquisitive stare.

"A dead man? The one you hired the room for?"

"Yes."

"Was he troubled with any disease likely to take him off that way?"

"No. Will you go up?"

The woman shrunk back and looked frightened.

"He might be up there if I went," she gasped.

"The person your son heard?"

"No, I don't know what I am saying."

"But your boy says he heard and saw something to-night. What was it, madame?"

There was no answer.

"Come, this is important. I want to know what Ben heard."

"Are you—a—detective?"

"This is no time for such questions. I am anxious to know what the boy heard."

"He heard some one come in."

"When?"

"I can't tell you just how long ago."

"Then, it was not a dream, as you told him? You heard the same noise?"

"I heard it for I was awake at the time, though I did not think Ben was."

"Well?"

"Whoever came in went up-stairs. I heard every step."

"But your child says he saw something as well."

"So he did for I saw it myself."

"What was it?"

"A man on the steps."

"Then you got up and looked?"

"I did. I slipped from bed and held my door open just a mite and Ben's keen eyes were looking, too. We saw midway up the steps a man who stood in the dim light which we keep burning in the hall all night. He was alone and stood like a statue for some time so that we had a good look at him. He did not seem to see me though he glanced at the door with the keenest eyes I ever saw in a human head; then he came down and passed out."

"What was he like?"

"He was rather tall and had a coat on which was buttoned to his chin. The face was clean and dark like that of the East Indians we saw at the show this summer. I never saw an American with a face like his. Ben crept back to bed when he went away and trembled all the rest of the night. He stood yonder and one of his hands rested on the wall. I can show you the very spot."

"Show me, madame."

The woman crept up the steps and watched by the ferret placed her finger in a certain place.

"Heavens! he left a mark! Look here," rung out her voice, and the detective was at her side in a moment.

"Don't you see the print of his hand on the wall? Here it is, every finger there, not one missing. Look! did you ever see anything like it?"

Gideon Grip looked with all eyes and saw on the white wall the plain outlines of a human hand and everything was perfect but the thumb.

"That accursed hand leaves its mark wherever it falls," he said, and the woman stared at him for an explanation which she did not get.

CHAPTER X.

THE DECOYED TRAIL-HOUND.

BRIGHT and early the next day the same boy who had summoned him by a note from Iris to the mystery of Dorsey Drake's death brought him another summons to the same house and Gideon Grip wondering what it meant, was soon at the door of the house on the avenue.

He was ushered into the parlor and in a little while Iris came in, her liquid eyes excited, though she was trying to keep them in abeyance, and stood before him.

She closed the door with care and then advanced until she reached an arm-chair into which she sunk.

"I have sent for you for I know of no other friend to whom I can go when I am in trouble," she said.

"What has happened now?"

Iris seemed to lose color as she looked into the face before her and in a strange voice she replied:

"There is more mystery and I am in it. It is the strangest thing in the world. I saw the hand again last night or rather this morning."

"But not on the same face where you saw it before? That is out of sight and—"

"No, it was not on the face of the dead," interrupted the girl. "If you will come with me I will show you where I saw it."

She led him from the room and into the library and laboratory where she stopped and drew aside the curtain of the window with her white hand.

"I came down stairs early this morning—it was barely light—in search of something which I thought was here, and pulling aside the curtain to give me more light, I saw on your wall near the end of the bookcase the print of the same hand I saw on his face. It was there

just as plain as it was when I saw it first and the moment my gaze fell upon it I uttered a cry I could not keep back and almost lost my senses. You cannot believe how I started at the apparition for it went through me like a knife. It was as real as though the hand itself and not its shadow was there and I almost sunk to the floor.

"Did you rouse the house?"

"Fortunately no," said Iris with a sigh. "Neither of my women know anything of the occurrence and I sent the boy to you for I can trust him in everything."

For a moment the detective sat silent looking into the beautiful face before him and wondering if he had tracked it the preceding night from the House of the Grinning God to the dwelling to which he had summoned him.

"The owner of that hand came back last night," she went on when she had recovered her breath. "He was with us in this house. He left his mark on the wall as he left it on the face of Dorsey Drake."

The ferret turned to the wall, but saw nothing to mar its whiteness, then he raised the curtain that hid the shelves of chemicals and appliances of science over which the dead man had spent so many hours.

"Do you miss anything from these shelves?" he asked.

Iris shook her head.

"Nothing is gone so far as I know—nothing but the book which we missed when I took you to the secret place where he used to keep the five."

"Were you home, do you think, when the hand came last night?"

"We must have been asleep—all of us."

There was no tremor in Iris's voice now.

"Miss Iris, do you ever go out at night?"

"Not often."

She seemed to avoid his gaze for the first time, and he thought he detected her voice shake.

"Did you ever hear Dorsey Drake say anything about a residence in India?"

"He never saw the land of the Hindoos."

"Are you sure of this, Miss Iris?"

"I am sure of nothing, but he never talked about that country, though he said much concerning other lands which he visited years ago."

The detective looked perplexed, and the next moment was smiling at the young girl.

"Some people have secrets which they keep from those nearest to them," he said. "He may have been to India, but never told you."

"It seems impossible."

Iris seemed willing to let the subject drop there, and Gideon Grip was not inclined to be too eager to pick up another link in the dark chain.

While he was quitting the house, he looked up the broad stairs and caught a glimpse of Miriam Marx's face hanging over the balustrade with one of her fingers at her lips.

The glances they exchanged were not seen by Iris, and the detective waited at the first corner for some one whom he was almost sure would come.

Presently there came flitting down the street the figure of Miriam, and they met in the sunlight.

"I could not wait," said the woman in whispers. "The man came back last night."

"The man?"

"The person I saw come down the front steps the night he was killed. I could not have been mistaken, for I went to that house with my eyes open, and I saw him in the hall last night, and could have touched him."

"What did he do?"

"I crept down the secret stair and saw him in the laboratory. He was all alone, and seemed as familiar with it as the master was. His back was turned toward me, and I watched him nearly an hour."

"Then he was in no hurry? What did he do?"

"He opened a door in the wall and took out several oldish looking books which he looked through, now and then tearing out a leaf and hiding it away in his pocket. I saw his face when he turned to go and knew him for the Man with the Valise."

"He took nothing but the leaves, eh, Miriam?"

"I am coming to the strangest part of the adventure now," continued Miriam Marx. "He slipped out of the room and I ran back up the secret stairs. In the hall above I stopped and saw him come up. He seemed to glide over the carpet for he made no noise at all, or I would have heard him. He slipped to Iris's room and leaned against the door for some time. All at once he took something from his bosom and tossed it over the transom."

"Are you sure he did this? You don't want to compromise Iris, Miriam?"

"I don't, heaven knows that," and the speaker's eyes seemed to get a strange light. "I distinctly saw the movement of his arm as the object was thrown over the transom and it must have fallen into her chamber. When he had done this he came back, creeping down the stairs with the same pantherish tread and passed out of the house by the rear exit."

The detective had not let one word of Miriam's singular narrative escape him. He had drank all in with bated breath and was thirsting for more.

"Was that all you saw?"

"All?" and she fell back looking at him with astonishment depicted on her face. "What more do you want?"

"You saw him go back and lost him outside the house?"

"I did. I didn't want to see him any more. When he was gone I slipped to Iris's door and listened. The room, nearly dark before, was now well lighted and I heard Iris moving about. I could not see what was going on in there, but I knew that she was up."

"Was she out of the house last night?" queried the ferret.

"She was."

"And she came in alone?"

"Yes."

"How long was she gone and between what hours, Miriam?"

"She must have been out more than an hour and between ten and twelve."

A look of confirmation for a moment gleamed in the detective's eye.

Telling Miriam that he would hear the promised story that night in one of the secret rooms of the house, he dismissed her and went away.

The man of mystery had been to Dorsey Drake's house; he had spent more than an hour in the laboratory and had stolen certain pages from the secret books which had cost the dead man so much. Not only this, but he had thrown something over the transom of Iris's door. It could not be that such a sharp creature as Miriam had been deceived.

That day yet the detective knew that the body of Captain Derrick had been found by the police, but as nothing was said about the mark of the hand, he felt that it had been seen by none.

The woman and her son said nothing about the mark on the wall along the stair, and that secret, too, was safe.

It was a day of watchfulness to the man of shadows.

When the shades of night came he turned down the light in his little room, and with the ejaculation, "Now for Miriam," went toward the door.

His hand was reaching for the latch when the portal opened, and he was confronted by the boy who was the young girl's messenger.

"What, another note from your mistress?" said Gideon Grip, taking from the outstretched hand a bit of paper.

The boy vanished, and leaning toward the light, he read:

"GIDEON GRIP:—Come to me at once to No. 113 St. L—street, without delay. I am no longer at the old home, but here, and I want you. IRIS."

The detective looked up, with astonishment on every lineament.

He could hardly believe the sentences he had read. Iris writing to him from 113 St. L—street!

He knew where it was, for had he not watched the place with the keen eyes of the ferret?

It was the House of the Grinning God!

Hiding the brief and startling missive in his pocket, the Secret Shadower turned down his light and went out.

The shadows of another night had fallen over the city, and the lamps were throwing their light in every direction.

Instinctively he looked back, as if he expected to hear behind him the stealthy footsteps of the tracker of the Black Hands.

He could imagine himself among the temples of India, with the sworn spy of the mystic sect at his heels, for had he not followed poor Derrick all over the world, to close in on him at last, and finish him in the last hiding-place of the hunted man?

But Gideon Grip was not to be turned back by such thoughts.

Iris had sent for him from the House of the Grinning God. Something had happened there, and she might be in peril.

He flitted down street after street, and found the vicinity of the twin houses as still as the grave.

Reaching the steps of the right number, Gideon Grip took hold of the knob and turned it.

At the same time he looked up at the head above the door. It seemed to grin with more than its usual devilishness, as if he had been lured to his doom.

But the ferret of Gotham pushed inside, and the next moment stood in a dimly-lighted hall, at the end of which appeared a figure, which came forward as he gazed.

"You have come. She awaits you," said a voice, and Gideon was led into a darkened room.

CHAPTER XI.

MIRIAM AND ZULEIKA.

MEANTIME Miriam Marx, the Woman Across the Street, was waiting for the man to whom she had promised to tell a startling tale.

She was alone in a small room of Iris's home and wondered why the detective did not come.

The clock ticked away the moments, but he came not though she looked at the door which she expected to see open and admit him.

The mystery of the something which she had

seen the Man with the Valise throw over the transom of Iris's chamber was as deep as ever and Miriam wondered if it would ever be cleared up.

She had not forgotten how to use her eyes, for she had been sent to the house for that very purpose, and, as the Child of the Silent Circle, she had carried out the orders of her strange chief.

Miriam went down the secret stairway and slipped into the room where Iris had discovered her guardian dead in his chair.

The place was dark, but here and there lay the semblance of a ray of light which tried to struggle through the closed blinds from the street.

With cat-like tread the woman glided across the room and stood where she had seen the stranger the night before.

She lifted the dark curtain that hid the shelves and ran her hand among the bottles and boxes there.

What was Miriam looking for?

She was doing this when she heard a step, and turning without betraying her presence she thought she made out a figure that slipped across the chamber.

Presently she knew she was not the sole occupant of the room.

Almost touching her stood a female form and the sharp eyes of Miriam Marx made out the familiar outlines of Zuleika, the maid.

The young girl—she was tall as well as young—had advanced to the curtain and a moment later she lifted it and was heard to breathe hard.

"It must be here for I saw him place it on the shelf the night he went out of the world," she was heard to say, confident that she was the only person in the room. "It is hard to tell the good from the bad on these shelves, but both are here in profusion."

As the maid turned to strike a light Miriam slipped behind the curtain which hung across one corner of the room and held her breath.

She had not neglected Zuleika since coming to that house of mystery.

She had noticed the girl, as if she were worth watching; she had discovered that she had a keen eye and a soft tread, that she knew how to slip from room to room apparently seeing nothing, yet taking in everything in it.

The light fell mainly upon the shelves and she saw Zuleika look over them with the greatest care.

There was an eager even tigerish glare in the eyes of the dark-faced, willowy girl, and Miriam grew afraid of her as she watched.

"This is it—it can't be anything else," suddenly cried Zuleika, her hand diving among the vials in a certain corner and dragging to light a greenish bottle which was tightly corked.

She held it between her and the light, and Miriam saw how its contents danced like the eyes of a howling dervish.

"In God's name, what has the girl found?" asked the woman on the watch. "She was hunting for something and she has been rewarded. What is in that vial?"

Zuleika sat down in the chair used by Dorsey Drake and continued to glare at the little bottle.

She shook it in the light, and seemed to take pleasure in seeing its liquid dance before her eyes.

"The creature is mad," cried Miriam.

"I would like to see some one else try it first," said Zuleika, aloud. "It is the right drug, I am sure of that, for I saw him hold it up in the light and talk to it that night. This was the bottle, for it was green and stoppered just like this."

The next moment Zuleika was on her feet and her eyes were wandering round the room.

"He used to keep a cage of rabbits in this room for his experiments," she went on. "Where are they? I don't remember having seen them taken away since his death."

"My God, is she going to search the room for the rabbits?" almost gasped Miriam.

Escape seemed one of the impossibilities for Zuleika was coming toward her corner and she was cowering in it like a rabbit in the corner of the cage where it has been thrown to the serpent.

The hand of the maid was outstretched and was almost at the curtain.

In another moment she would be in her grip. "Why not take an advantage of this mad girl?" thought Miriam.

In another instant she had dashed the curtain aside and stood before the startled maid.

Zuleika fell back, but not with fear. In a moment she was herself and Miriam instead of frightening her from the room, found herself in her grasp.

"So you are here, are you?" said Zuleika, looking into the white face of the woman on the watch. "I thought I would find the rabbits, but you will serve my purpose quite as well."

"Your purpose?"

"Why not?" and Miriam was dragged despite her strength which seemed to have deserted her, toward the table, and before she could resist she had been forced into the chair and was looking up into the blazing eyes of Iris's maid.

"What do you want?" stammered Miriam.

"What don't I want?" was the reply in laughing tones. "Look here, my spy. Do you see this?" and the vial was held before Miriam and she saw the dancing bubbles on the surface of the unknown liquid.

"I want to know if this is the elixir he sought. I want to know if I hold in my hand the secret of the old books."

"Why not test it?"

"That is just what I am going to do. You are on the right trail. I intend to test the drug now and upon you."

No wonder Miriam shrunk into the depths of the chair and gazed in speechless helplessness at the mad girl.

"Why don't you find the rabbits and try it upon them?"

"When I have you with me? No, no! Come, we will try it now. I won't take much of it. A drop may be enough. Think of it. You may have the elixir of endless life in your veins by taking but a drop of this fluid."

Zuleika drew toward her on the table a wine-glass and began to open the vial.

Her face had changed color and was now flushed with excitement.

Her hands were steady as if they were under full control and poor Miriam, for the present unnerved and powerless, could only gaze at what she believed was a draught of death.

"For God's sake, think of what you are doing," she appealed at last when she found her tongue.

"I am thinking. I want the elixir I saw him make after the formula in the old book. I am doing what he would have done if he had lived. Are you ready?"

The very desperation of the moment seemed to send a flash of fire through Miriam's veins.

She exerted all her strength and sprang up, but the hand of Zuleika seized her and she went back into the chair.

"Down! You shall test the drug for me. Think of it; you may be the first to receive the new discovery, or you may drop dead the moment the drug touches your tongue."

"It will be death."

"You don't know. There is a risk, to be sure, but you ought to be willing to take it."

Powerless again, Miriam could only gaze into the face above her; she saw the vial trembling over the rim of the glass and the colorless fluid was running to the mouth of the vial.

Her life trembled in the balances of the near future.

"They will find me dead here and you will be accused of doing the deed," she said.

"Will I? What if I am not here when they find you? Didn't they say that Dorsey Drake took his own life and who knows better? What has the ferret found out?"

Zuleika was heartless and Miriam saw in the gleaming eyes nothing but death and terror.

All at once the hand of the maid swooped down upon Miriam's shoulder and she was held in the grip of a vise.

"It will be over in a moment," said Zuleika.

Miriam made one more effort. The horror of her situation loosened her tongue. She sprang up shrieking and ran toward the secret button—which had let her into the chamber.

Zuleika, tiger-like, was at her heels.

Miriam threw up her hand and tried to find the button but fate seemed against her; she missed it.

"There's no door there!" cried the girl at her back. "You can't rush through a solid wall. Ha, ha! I have you at last."

The Woman Across the Street turned with the fury of a cornered lioness.

She saw nothing but death in the greenish bottle clutched by the girl; she saw the fiery eyes that blazed in her face and went at them.

The next moment she and Zuleika were struggling for the mastery over the carpet.

They writhed back and forth like Amazons in deadly conflict, now Miriam had the advantage and now Zuleika had snatched it from her.

"You shall taste it! You shall try the effects of the new elixir. There is no help for it. If it don't kill you, I will drink it all."

"Will you?"

"By the gods, I will. I want to feel in my blood the fluid of eternal life."

"Hand me the bottle."

Zuleika drew back with a laugh and said, "No."

"I will force it to your lips. I will make you drink first, but the vial shall leave my hand."

Miriam was forced against the wall. She felt the hand of the mad girl at her throat.

It was all over; the deadly vial was nearly at her lips.

Nearer and nearer it came, borne forward by the hand of Zuleika.

"One drop, only one. I heard him say it would be enough, but whether to preserve or to kill I know not."

Miriam closed her lips, glued them together with the two-fold energy of despair.

Why didn't the detective come! He knew the way to the laboratory.

"What, aren't you going to know what is in the vial?" cried Zuleika. "Come. If you don't drink I will force it through your lips and give you all of it."

There was a sound on the right.

"Look yonder!" said Miriam.

Zuleika turned her head and then the Woman Across the Street went forward. It was the last attempt to save her life. She seized the maid with the grip of a demoness; she jerked from her hands the fatal bottle, and though spilling half of its contents on the floor, she forced it between Zuleika's lips.

A wild cry pealed from the hapless creature's throat.

CHAPTER XII.

THE HOUSE OF MAGIC.

LET us go back to the detective.

We left Gideon Grip in the House of the Grinning God, and in a room which was dark and still.

"Where is she?" he asked himself when the person who had conducted him to the spot had withdrawn.

As there was no sound at all and he had not heard his conductor quit the room, he spoke aloud the question he had asked himself.

Silence as before.

The next moment he went forward in the gloom and tried to find the door by which he had entered the room.

At the same time he drew a revolver for he was now fearful that he had been decoyed to a trap of some kind and he intended to resist the machinations of the Unknown.

It did not take him long to find the door, but it would not open.

Gideon Grip took a match from his pocket and was about to strike it on the wall when he heard a noise.

It was the closing of a door somewhere and he stopped and listened.

Still the silence that surrounded him was not invaded.

"This is a trap, sure enough and I am a fool," he thought. "I have been decoyed by the Black Hands and—"

The door opened, but he saw no one. Falling back from the portal with the cocked six-shooter in his grip, he looked and wondered what would follow the opening of the door.

"Who is there?" he asked.

In reply a greenish light seemed to creep along the floor like a fiery snake.

It blazed, but did not burn the carpet; it leaped to his feet, yet did not have any heat.

"The devil is in this," cried the detective, watching the spirals of emerald flame as they danced about his feet, leaping almost to his knees, yet not even singeing his clothes.

There was no answer.

All at once the ferret sprang across the line of light and turned to where he thought the unseen person stood.

"I have you covered with my revolver, and there will be a dead body where you stand if I am not told why I have been decoyed here," he said sternly.

"Look to the wall over your right shoulder."

Gideon Grip instinctively turned in the direction indicated by the voice, and the wall seemed crossed and recrossed with fiery serpents that twisted in and out of each other as a den of snakes would.

But he saw more than this. He saw, after a second look, that the twistings were words, that letters were being formed by the darting flames.

"Read your doom in the fire of fate!" said the same voice.

Gideon Grip was already doing this.

He was reading on the wall, sentences which were terrible enough to make the coolest shudder, but he had shut his teeth hard and was not flinching from the ordeal.

"The ferret is in the trap of the Black Hand!" he read. "He will soon be ashes, and scattered to the winds of the river."

"Ho, that is my doom, is it?" cried the detective, drawing back and turning once more to the left, where he knew the speaker, still unseen, must stand.

"That is the fate of the tracker who seeks to baffle the sons of Vishkar."

He thought of poor Derrick's story; he recalled how the Englishman had ventured back to India to steal from the idol's bosom the green stone of fate.

He fell back, crossing the room, all the time looking for the person who had addressed him, but he could see no one.

"Where is Iris?" he asked.

"Fool, there is no such person!" was the reply.

"You have her in your accursed grip; you have in your toils the young girl whom you robbed of a guardian."

"There is no Iris. She has become the priestess of Vishkar."

"Iris Norman?"

"Iris Norman!"

Gideon Grip felt a chill run through all his blood.

"We will show you," continued the voice. "You shall see the young virgin of the mighty Vishkar. Look straight ahead."

He did so, and saw that the whole wall had given place to a small stage.

It was adorned with the thousand and one strange things to be seen only in the mystic temples of the East. He saw the grotesque heads of idols, the hideous crocodilian monsters which are worshiped in the land of the Hindoo, and over all hung a pall of mystic smoke which, while it seemed dense, was easily penetrated.

Suddenly out of all of this rose a figure which seemed to come up through the floor.

The breathless ferret leaned forward in his eagerness and stared at the apparition.

"Iris!" fell from his lips.

Yes, the beautiful object upon which he gazed looked like the young girl.

He saw her face in the light that surrounded it, but it was dark and terribly strange, though beautiful.

She stood in the glare of the mystic light which fell upon the appointments of the stage-like place, and while the detective looked she seemed to approach him.

"Great heavens, it is not Iris!" he cried. "She has the girl's beauty, but I see now that it is another."

A laugh sounded on his ears and he looked back.

"She will tell you that she is the priestess of Vishkar," was the sentence he heard.

The hand of the girl was outstretched, and he saw upon the bared wrist the bracelet which he had seen on Iris's a score of times.

"I am in the service of the goddess of life and time," said the lips he was watching. "I am no longer Iris of the house of darkness and death. We kill those who cross our paths, and the man before me is doomed to have his ashes scattered to the winds of the river!"

The voice was the very voice of Iris Norman, and as it ceased the whole scene vanished, and Gideon Grip found himself standing once more in gloom.

The fiery serpents no longer played about his feet and all was still.

"What do you think now?"

"That I stand in a house of infernal magic," was the prompt response. "I have been inspired by the same hand that took Dorsey Drake's life, and the one I have sworn to ferret out."

"If there are trails beyond the river, you can hunt there," was the reply.

"I will track the murderer down this side of the grave."

He started toward the door, but something clutched him and he was hurled back.

The hand he had felt came for a moment in contact with his neck-skin, and he had been thrilled.

He had felt every finger of that hand; they had been pressed into his flesh as it were; but he felt but half a thumb!

The detective recalled the mark of the Black Hand as he had seen it in several places. He knew that he had felt on his own person the mark of the same hand which had taken the life of Dorsey Drake, the nabob and Iris's guardian. There could be no mistake about this, and when he was thrust back by that hand he felt his blood leap hot through his veins.

"You will track us down, will you?" cried a voice. "We will see that the fool dies as his ancestors have died before him."

Gideon Grip almost fell against the wall, but recovering the moment the hand left his throat, he sprang forward again and reached the door.

This time he was not thrown back as before.

He was in the hall which he had entered a few minutes previously in search of Iris, but now he saw not the figure which had conducted him to the dark room.

"Man, you have no more chance of getting back to the street than you have of flying."

"It is false!"

The entrapped ferret glared at the door like a tiger glares at the bars that shut him off from his native jungle.

"Why don't you try?" mockingly said the same voice.

The detective went forward and seized the knob.

He twisted it madly, at the same time jerking back, but the door was as immovable as so much iron.

With a curse he turned back and looked up the stairs that confronted him.

To be shut up in such a house of magic was too much for the cool-headed ferret.

He was not to be baffled in that way; the Black Hand was not to obtain over him a bloodless victory, and that by having decoyed him by a false appeal for help.

At that moment something came down the steps.

It seemed to fall down the flight, but it did not take the detective long to see that it was endowed with life and that it was a living serpent.

The greenish eyes emitted sparks of fire; the tongue, darting in and out, told of approaching doom and the detective falling back from the slimy apparition with his teeth shut hard, eyed the reptile as it came down the flight.

At last it tumbled upon the floor and began to crawl toward him.

He fell back to the nearest corner and raised his revolver.

Not more than three feet separated them.

The serpent with the scaly skin was creeping nearer and nearer. He covered it and fired.

The report of the weapon seemed to sound strangely in that old house.

The lifting smoke showed him the writhing snake on the floor, for the ball had cut in twain its deadly folds.

He watched its contortions with secret satisfaction, saw the two parts twist and writhe and at last lie still.

"That is the beginning of the end, fool of America!" said the voice he had heard. "You have killed the sacred guardian of the Black Hand and now your hour has come."

He looked down the corridor and saw a door open in his face.

He saw at the same time the figure that stood in the doorway and stretched out a hand dark enough to have been that of a Hindoo.

The following moment the floor seemed to tremble under his feet, then a sound that seemed like the parting of boards grated on his ear, and he was going down, down while a pair of eyes glittered over the yawning pit.

"It is the hand of Vishkar!" was the last thing he heard.

"It is the devil's magic!" he responded in his heart and then all grew dark and he seemed to pass into the very darkness of death.

If Gideon Grip could have looked into the corridor when the yawning pit closed he would have seen a man come forth and grin from ear to ear.

And if he had looked closer still he might have seen that one of the yellowish hands had a mutilated thumb.

CHAPTER XIII.

BREAKING THE SPELL.

THE despairing cry of Zuleika, the maid, thrilled Miriam Marx.

She saw her fall back from her hand and with eyes that seemed ready to start from her head, she glared at the vial which had touched her lips.

In another moment the limp figure of Zuleika lay on the floor, the face as white as death.

Had the contents of the bottle done their work, and was it the agent of death and not the elixir of life?

Miriam stood for a moment over the body of the dark-faced girl and looked down upon her.

She was alone with the poor creature and knew also that Iris was not in the house, for she had seen her slip out and vanish among the lights and shadows of the city.

"I dare not stay here after this," said the Woman Across the Street. "I must fly, go back from the shadows that envelop me. They must not find me in this house with Zuleika dead before me."

She touched the button in the wall and crept from the chamber.

"They may think that she took her own life for the deadly bottle lies beside her," continued Miriam. "They said Dorsey Drake died by his own hand and they may think the same of that mad girl."

She left the room, going back to the chamber she had occupied since coming into the house and tarried there for a moment.

Gideon Grip had not come and Miriam could not account for his absence.

He had promised her to come as early as possible and she could not think what detained him.

Ah, if she had known the truth, if she could have looked beyond the walls of the House of the Grinning God she would have quickened her steps and put many a long square between her and the shadow of the dread Black Hand.

Half an hour after her strange adventure in Iris's house Miriam ascended a flight of steps and entered a little room on the second floor.

It was the quarters she had taken after abandoning the ones she had kept so long as the woman at the window, and there she thought she might be safe.

Perhaps the chief of the Silent Circle would not find her there and she would not have to answer for her stewardship in Iris's home.

But the woman was disappointed.

She had barely recovered from her struggle with Zuleika when the sound of footsteps came up the stairs and she sprang to the door with blanched face.

"He sha'n't come in!" she cried, halting at the door which she eyed with the energy of despair.

There was a moment's silence outside and then a knocking startled her.

Miriam stood still as if undecided what to do. Presently there came another knocking and then a voice was heard.

"You are there, woman. Why don't you open?"

"Heavens, 'tis he!" gasped Miriam, and the next moment she put out her hand and opened the door.

The person who slipped into the room was the same one who had confronted her when she was ordered to enter Iris Norman's home and play spy for the Silent Circle.

He shut the door behind him and came forward.

All the time his eyes seemed to look Miriam through and she stood watching him from the middle of the room.

"Well, is your work done already?" he asked.

"I am not there as you see!" was the reply.

"You left there awhile ago?"

"Yes."

"You kept your eyes open all the time?"

"I did."

Miriam was replying to him in an altered voice and he might have seen that she was not herself.

"Come, woman; I want the whole report of your stay in the nabob's house. Did you discover what takes the mistress out at night and where she goes?"

"You forget that that was not my mission. I was to watch her in the house, not dog her on the street."

"You don't exceed your orders, I see. Well, what did you discover?"

"I found out that the accursed house is haunted."

"How haunted?"

"I mean that there are secret doors and hidden stairways."

"Ah! You found them, did you?"

"Yes."

"Who uses them?"

"In the first place, there is Zuleika, the maid."

"The tall girl with the dark face and handsome eyes? Zuleika they call her, do they?"

Miriam nodded.

"I discovered that Iris has a hidden chamber which is fitted up with all the gorgeousness of an Eastern room. It has tiger-skins on the floor and the grinning gods of India are everywhere."

"Were you in that room?"

"I entered it at the risk of my life."

"When Iris was out of the house, of course?"

"Yes. I was not foolish enough to enter it when she was there."

For a moment the man who had questioned Miriam so eagerly was silent and then he crossed the room and seemed to reflect.

"You should have searched this tiger-rugged room," he said, looking across the chamber at her. "If Iris is living like an Indian princess, you should have found it out."

Miriam smiled.

"Perhaps I did find out," she said.

"Tell me, then. Tell me what you discovered in that secret chamber. Spy of the Silent Circle, tell me all."

He came back to her, his eyes on fire and reading, as it seemed, her inmost thoughts.

"I found on the dresser a little box which had a key in it," she went on. "At first I was afraid to touch it, but at last I opened it with the key and looked inside."

"Well?"

"At first I saw nothing, but presently I discovered a small flat vial which lay among green silk and it was filled with a singular looking fluid which did not have much color. The night before I had watched Iris and witnessed a strange play."

"What was it?"

"She went to her room and there stood before the mirror. I saw her take from a box on the dresser a vial which she opened and put to her lips. She seemed to drink of the contents of the bottle and in a few moments a terrible change took place. She grew dark, her skin changed color and she was to all appearances an Asiatic. You would have taken her for an East Indian princess, but I knew that she was Iris all the same."

"Woman, why didn't you steal that vial?" asked the man who had watched Miriam like a hawk. "Why didn't your sleek hand put it in your bosom and carry it to me?"

"That would have rendered Iris suspicious, and I would have had her to face."

The dark man laughed.

"There is no other drug like that this side of the temples of the Land of Mystery. Iris possesses the only supply of it in this country, and the theft of it would have broken the spell."

"What spell?" queried Miriam.

"The spell of the mystic Black Hand. With that vial beyond her reach, she could not transform herself into an Indian, and the Hand would have been rendered powerless."

Miriam said nothing.

"We want that vial."

"You know where it is," was the reply. "It is on her dresser in the little box."

"You must go back and get it."

"I?"

"You, Miriam. You know the house and how to get to the secret chamber. Go back and get the vial and the box."

She fell back from before the searching eyes of the speaker, and her look was a mute appeal for mercy.

"What, have you forgotten your oath?" he cried, clutching her wrist.

"Don't you know that you are still in the power of the Silent Circle? Woman, there is no release for you till the spell is broken and we let you go."

Miriam Marx fairly glared at the man who gripped her.

What, go back to where she had left Zuleika dead on the floor of the laboratory? Return to the spot where she had fought for life against a deadly poison in the hands of a mad girl? Never!

The time had come for her deliverance from the Silent Circle.

She had fallen into its net almost unconsciously, and when she was ambitious. She had been drawn into the toils and suddenly found herself oath-bound and the slave of a brotherhood of which she knew but little, but that little enough to make her blood run cold.

She knew that the Silent Circle was operating against the Black Hand, that both orders had had their birth in India, but had transferred their work to the shores of America; that the Circle was as anxious to break the power of the Black Hand as was Gideon Grip, but from another motive.

Miriam was tired of serving this accursed brotherhood. She wanted to get out of its clutches, but how was she to get beyond its hand unless she broke the web herself?

"You must go—back to Iris's house for the vial and the box," continued the man before her.

Miriam looked, but did not reply.

"Return now. Go back and bring me the elixir that changes the girl's complexion. I want it."

The woman stood like a statue before him, and then suddenly threw up one hand.

"I can't go back there," she said. "You don't know what I left behind."

"Pish! You shall go."

Once more his hand seemed to sink to the bone, and he dragged her toward the door.

Miriam all at once jerked herself loose from him and reeled away.

"Woman, you are still ours. Don't forget for a second that you are still in the grip of the Circle."

"I am yours no longer!" cried Miriam. "I will no longer serve the accursed order that forces me to add theft to its other crimes."

"What will you do?" he laughed.

Miriam was near the door which opened into an adjoining room, and when he started toward her she drew from beneath the folds of her gown the same knife with which she had waited for the Man with the Valise in the room opposite the nabob's mansion, and faced her persecutor.

"As I live, I will kill you if you advance another step!" she exclaimed. "I am going to break the spell you have thrown round me if I have to do it with the dagger."

The man stopped and looked at her. He could hardly believe that this was the Miriam they had enslaved.

"You seal your own doom. You devour yourself," was all he said, and to her astonishment Miriam saw him turn and leave the room.

She ran to the other door and heard him go down the stair, and then caught a glimpse of his figure on the street below.

Panting like a chased doe, she leaned against the window and watched him until he was out of sight, then, going back to the middle of the room, she dropped into a chair and breathed hard.

"It must be flight and hiding now," she said. "I am the outlaw of the Silent Circle, and I must not let it find me with its secret agent of doom."

She did not let many minutes pass over her head in that chamber.

She descended to the street and made her way across the city to Gideon Grip's office. The ferret was the first person she thought of in connection with safety.

But the door was barred to her, and she was forced to turn back.

"There must be a hiding-place somewhere," she cried.

"Who are after you?"

The voice made the woman turn, and in the light of the lamp near by she saw a man whose face sent a thrill through every nerve.

"Merciful heavens, you?" cried Miriam, and then she bounded away like a deer.

She had come face to face with the Man with the Valise, the Mystery of the night of the nabob's murder.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TRAIL OF THE UNKNOWN.

THE man looked at Miriam as if puzzled by her flight, but suddenly the truth seemed to flash upon him and he hastened in the direction taken by the girl.

There was a strange look in his eyes and he seemed eager to overtake her.

"That was the girl who came to the house the other day," he said in audible tones. "She is on the street and her flight from me tells me that she has seen me in the house. I must not lose sight of her. She belongs to us."

But Miriam seemed to have given him the slip, for though he followed her some distance, he lost her completely and was forced to stop and turn back.

He went back over the ground he had traversed after Miriam and at last entered a house the door of which he locked behind him.

In a small upper room of the building he lighted the gas and took some cigars from the box on a shelf.

"It was an odd meeting," he said. "I did

not expect to see the girl on the street at this hour. I wonder if she suspects anything? Is she some one's spy?"

He threw the cigar into the empty fireplace and got up.

"I'll go and see," he continued and the next moment he was tearing down the steps to the street.

Hailing a cab, this man whose face was dark and whose hands were incased in gloves, got out near Iris's home and walked the remainder of the distance.

Ghost-like he crept to the door and admitted himself, shutting the portal after him.

Once more he was in the house of death and mystery.

For a little while he stood in the dimly lighted hall and then glided up-stairs.

"Everything is quiet here," he said. "I don't hear any one, and one would think, but for the furniture, that the old house was uninhabited. They are here, however."

He stood near Iris's door and applied his ear to the keyhole.

A smile passed over his face.

"Sleeping like a babe," he said, drawing back and creeping down the corridor. "The girl with two lives is Iris once more. What a strange existence is hers. Now she is Iris of the mansion and the next hour she enacts a totally different role."

He stopped alongside a wall where no door was visible, lifted his hand to a certain spot and vanished.

If any one had followed him he would have seen him creep down a narrow stairway in the dark and at last emerge into Dorsey Drake's room.

If Zuleika had remained where she had fallen from the hands of Miriam he would have found her there, but the dark-faced girl was gone.

The Unknown looked over the room, and then advanced to the table at which the nabob had been found dead in his chair.

In another moment he had turned on the gas not very bright, but enough for his purposes.

He sat down and began to examine the things on the table.

Casting his eyes to the floor, he suddenly discovered something that surprised him.

It lay near one of the legs of the table, and in a moment he had it in his hand—a slender greenish bottle which was empty.

"What was in this?" he cried, holding it up to the light and smiling as he eyed it.

He carried the vial to his nostrils and drew back from the odor that escaped.

The next moment he sprang to the shelves and threw back the curtain that hid them.

His searching eye ran along them all.

"This bottle was missing when we looked for it before," he said. "I looked over the shelves, but it was not here, and now I hold it in my hand!"

Looking at the vial again, he went back to the table and turned the tiny glass upside down.

A single drop of liquid remained at the bottom of the vial, and he watched it as it crept to the mouth.

By-and-by it fell upon a bit of glass which he had placed for its reception, and he leaned over it and studied it for some time.

"Some one has taken the rest of this," he said between his teeth. "Some person discovered the drug and stole it—all but this one drop. Was it the work of the girl I met on the street? Did she steal the poison, and who sent her to this house for that purpose? The detective?"

He filled the chair until he had watched the drop glistening on the glass nearly three minutes.

When he stood erect again he took in the room with his sweeping glance and fell back to the door.

Pausing there he looked toward the table, and with some muttered words passed out.

Two minutes later he paused at the head of the stairs in the hall above the laboratory and looked toward Iris's room.

"Maybe it was her work," he said. "Did Iris steal the poison and rob the vial of its contents? I would like to know."

At that moment he heard a quick step behind him, and turning he beheld a woman's figure in the shadows near by.

"Stand where you are," he said, starting forward. "On peril of your life, don't quit that corner."

He reached the woman in the semi-darkness, and throwing out one hand grasped her wrist and drew her toward him.

"Who are you? Speak."

He was looking down into a face almost as dark as an Indian's, and into eyes that seemed to have the frozen glitter of ice.

"Mercy! I am Zuleika."

"You Zuleika? Nonsense!"

The woman drew back and shivered.

"Before God, I am Iris's maid," she went on. "I am Zuleika. I have been beyond the grave, and all because she forced the accursed poison between my lips."

"The poison? Who forced it between your lips?"

"Miriam."

The Unknown laughed.

"Come, tell me all, but not here. We will go back to the library."

"Of all places on earth, not there!" cried Zuleika. "It was there I met her, and there we fought each other like tigresses."

He did not seem to hear her, but dragged her on until they had reached the library door, when he opened it and showed her the scene of her struggle with Miriam.

Zuleika crossed the threshold with a cry, and stood shivering in the middle of the room.

"We are safe here," he went on. "You must tell me all about it. I want to know."

"You ought to know everything."

"Never mind that. How did it happen? You say she made you drink the poison?"

Zuleika, recovering somewhat, told the story of her struggle with Miriam in the chamber, and was listened to with breathless interest.

"But you came here on hunt of something?" accused the Unknown.

There was no answer.

"How did you know where to put your hand upon the vial?"

"I—I saw him hide it."

"When?"

"The night he died."

She was looking at him now, and saw in his eyes a glitter which was not there a moment before.

"You saw him hide the vial, did you? And you thought you would see what it contained?"

Zuleika nodded.

"Girl, I want the book."

She recoiled with a start.

"I want the fifth book of the mystic set. You know where it is."

Zuleika sent a swift glance toward the secret niche in the wall, from which the last book of the series had mysteriously disappeared, and did not look at him again.

"You carried off that volume. You have been looking for the elixir that made a fool of him. Come, where is the book?"

Zuleika pleaded for mercy, feebly denying that she knew anything of the book, but her manner gave the lie to her words.

The look of the Unknown grew sterner than ever.

"You can't baffle us," he said. "What, a girl like you come between us and our victory? Pish! Zuleika, I want the book!"

She led him to her little room on the other floor.

Stooping over the bed, she ran her hand beneath the covering and drew forth the volume whose companions stood on the hidden shelf in the library.

"You will always be as dark as you are," he said to her. "That is the action of the poison."

She glanced toward a mirror and for an instant caught sight of her changed face. She was not the Zuleika of other days. The liquid which Miriam had forced between her lips had done its work and she was as tawny as an Indian.

"They wouldn't know you at the old place," he went on, seeing her glance. "They would never suspect that you were, Zuleika."

"I know that, but I am never going back to give them a chance to guess the riddle. I am going away—out of this accursed house."

"They will hunt you down. Aren't you afraid of that?"

"Why should they hunt me down?"

He laughed again.

"Don't you know that they are after the hand that is said to have killed Dorsey Drake in this house?"

"But they said it was suicide."

"The doctors did, but what do the ferrets think?"

The words seemed to stagger Zuleika.

"But it wasn't my work," she said at last.

"Prove it! They will go back and look up your history. They will discover that you have had a desire to live always, that you have frequented the house of learned men, chemists, who know a great deal about the secret agents of life and death. This isn't the only house of the kind you have inhabited, girl."

"Who are you?"

Zuleika's look was a hard stare and the eyes into which she gazed seemed to burn above her with more mystery than ever.

"Never mind who I am. The world isn't big enough to hide you from the ferrets," he said. "They will fall upon your track the moment you pass the doors of this mansion. You will be hunted down and the mad girl who took an oath years ago that she would live forever will suddenly find herself in the grip of the vises of the law."

"Merciful heavens!" cried Zuleika. "Is there no escape for me?"

"None," was the heartless answer. "You are in the meshes of suspicion and you cannot escape."

She looked across the room and then back into his face.

"Look here, girl; there may be a way out of the trap," he suddenly continued.

Zuleika seemed to start with sudden joy.

"A way out of the trap? Don't torture me?"

"You will not quit this house."

"But my skin? Look how it has changed. I am not the same creature I was when I came here. What will Iris say when she sees me?"

That was something, and that moment it thrilled the shivering girl.

"Iris will look and say nothing. My word for it, she won't bother you about your new color. You must remain in this house, for to quit it now is to imperil your life."

"Look among the bottles on the shelves below. You have been in that room. You know what is there and what is not."

"How do you know that, girl?"

"I have seen you there."

"When did you see me in that room?"

Zuleika did not avoid his gaze, but looked him fairly in the face as she spoke again.

"You were there the night of the 10th!" she said.

He did not start or lose color, but it seemed to Zuleika that his eye grew deadlier and his lips shut hard.

"Beware, girl! That was a fatal night."

"I know it, but I saw you that night."

"Where?"

"You came out of the library alone and—"

"There! The breathing of that secret destroys you."

CHAPTER XV.

THE MAIMED THUMB AGAIN.

ZULEIKA could hardly realize that the Unknown was gone.

He had vanished with the last words on his lips, and she was alone in that house of secrets.

More than this, she had one of her own and had been told to keep it on peril of her life.

For some time she stood where he had left her trying to recover her composure but this was difficult.

Who was that man?

To her he was as impenetrable a mystery as he had always been and she could not help recalling the time she saw him come out of that dread room with the secret of the dead locked in his bosom.

Miriam Marx had seen him come out of the house, but she had seen him emerge from the laboratory, and knew that when Iris went to her guardian she found him dead and cold in his chair.

And he had told her that the moment she breathed the secret she held she destroyed herself.

She looked toward Iris's door and wondered if she knew of the presence in the house of the Unknown.

The door was closed to her and she could not see beyond the threshold.

Then she bethought herself of the hidden room whither Iris went at certain hours and crept toward it.

She had not lived in the house for nothing. Her eyes had been on the alert and she has discovered how to enter that mysterious chamber and find the strange appointments which breathed of India and its dark secrets.

Looking once more at her reflection in the glass and noting the work of the drug she crept down-stairs and tried to hear the footsteps of the Unknown, but they were gone and her ears were not acute enough to hear them on the streets.

"He said they would track me the moment I left the house," she said to herself. "Why should they? Who is the detective who came hither at Iris's bidding and where does he live? I might go to him, but that would be breaking my word with the Unknown. It seems to me that I promised to keep the secret—that I swore not to tell any one that he came out of the room that night. Dare I betray him? Heavens, no!"

Zuleika went back to her own chamber, but did not go to bed.

The events of the night were enough to keep her awake.

The struggle with Miriam for the poison still rattled her nerves and she could not help looking at her changed face in the mirror.

At the same time she felt in her veins the poison of the East.

She no longer was the same creature in any measure.

Her blood and nature seemed changed.

As for the man who had met Zuleika in the house of the nabob he passed out of sight and untracked—for who was to track him now that the jaws of the trap had closed on the Secret Shadower?—found his way across the city and ran up the steps of the House of the Grinning God.

What would Gideon Grip have thought if he had been free to track this strange man to that place?

The Unknown passed up-stairs and opened a door where none was visible, then walked into a room which was nearly dark.

The place was nearly bare of furniture, but his feet made no noise as he advanced, and when he had reached a certain spot on the carpet, he touched a button, and the room was in a blaze of light.

"Here you are," said the Unknown, looking at the only occupant of the chamber besides himself.

"I am always here."

The person who answered him seemed an hundred years old, but the eyes gleamed with the light of a basilisk's, and the long, skinny hands looked dangerous.

The Unknown took a chair, and for a few moments looked at the old man, who reclined on a sofa which stood against one of the walls.

"Well, I have been in the house again," said the Unknown. "I have met a secret-keeper, but I think I silenced her."

"A woman, eh?"

"Yes—Zuleika."

The old man, whose skin was dark, almost black, though his long hair, almost snow-white, told that he was not negro, passed his hands over his face and smiled.

"These women don't keep secrets very well," he said. "They ought to be silenced, every one of them. What did you do to her?"

"I left her in possession of the field, but she won't bother us."

"You left her there, did you?" and the body of the old man seemed to lengthen like a serpent. "You did not leave her alive, did you?"

"I did, but she is silenced—"

"Then you stole her tongue."

"Neither did I do that, but I tell you she won't betray us."

The gleaming eyes on the sofa looked more like a snake's than before.

"I don't trust them—I never did," he said.

"I wouldn't trust the creature woman for the world. So they call this new secret-keeper Zuleika?"

"Yes."

"Is she Iris's maid?"

"She is."

"Young?"

"Young and a handsome girl, but not as fine-looking as she was twenty-four hours ago."

"Ha, you did something to her after all? I understand you now. You robbed her of her beauty."

"She partially did that herself."

"How?"

The handsome face of the Unknown came nearer the old man, and he seemed to laugh.

"Her curiosity got the better of her and she tasted something which she found in the library and laboratory."

"Something he discovered, eh?"

"Yes."

"Do you think he really deciphered the last book which is missing?"

"I don't know; but the book isn't missing any longer."

The occupant of the sofa sprang up with the agility of a cat and seized the arm of the Unknown.

"Where is it?" he cried.

In response to his words the Unknown drew from beneath his coat the book which Zuleika had given up and held it up in the light.

A wild cry of delight burst from the old man's throat.

He tore the old volume from the hands that held it and pressed it to his bosom.

"This is the secret book of the East!" he cried.

"This is the book which we have tracked all over the world. It is the one they stole that day in India, but now it is ours once more."

"Ours to burn."

The serpent eyes of the old man wandered to the fire burning in the grate and he seemed to draw back with the book clutched in his hands.

"You are right," he said, looking at the Unknown. "It must be burned for the world is full of thieves and the sacred book is safe nowhere but in the flames."

He moved across the room with the volume clutched in his hands, but the cold gray eyes of the Unknown followed him.

"Will he burn it?" he muttered. "Does he intend to destroy the very thing which has kept life in his body for years and years? By heaven, I believe he does!"

All at once the old Indian—he had the air of a mystic—leaned toward the blaze in the grate and the book was thrust forward.

"Heavens, do you intend to destroy the book?" cried the Unknown.

"In the blaze the secrets it holds are safe. There may arise another life-hunter like the American; he may find the book and decipher its mysteries."

"Burn it, then."

These words seemed to give their speaker joy. The Unknown watched the old man with eyes that never left him for a moment and he saw him cast the book into the fire where it seemed to shrivel like a dead hand.

The old man's eyes got a new and devilish light as the flames licked up the book and when it had vanished altogether, he turned to the Unknown with a countenance which would have done credit to a triumphant fiend's.

"It is safe now," he grinned. "When they look for the sacred book of life it will be beyond their reach."

"But what if he deciphered its secret?"

"He hadn't the key," was the quick retort. "He was a man of learning, but he never discovered the secret of the book."

It seemed that the burning of the old volume had taken from its destroyer the very essence of

life, for he tottered back to the sofa and fell there with his eyes closed and like one dead.

The Unknown watched him a few moments and seemed to smile.

"If you know what I know you would be at my throat with those tiger-claw fingers of yours," he said to himself. "If you knew that you missed destroying the most valuable portion of the old book—that I carry next my heart the leaves that bear the formula of life—the one Dorsey Drake sought, you wouldn't lie there with your eyes closed like a mummy. No, old Sakkar, you would be for burying your talons in my throat. I guess the game is fast becoming mine. I hold all the cards now. I am master of the situation."

Suddenly the Unknown rose and slipped from the room. He entered a small adjoining apartment and took from his pocket some parchment-like pages which he proceeded to secrete in a niche in the wall, brought to light by the pressure of a button.

"It is safe there and when I want it I will know where to find the secret worth playing for. I wonder how the ferret fares? And what is Iris dreaming about at this hour?"

He turned toward the door and was in the act of quitting the room when he was startled by a footstep and the following moment it receded from the threshold.

"Are they shadowing me in this house?" he cried. "Woe to the hand that seeks to despoil me at this stage of the game."

He was sure that he had heard feet leave his door, and he glided to the portal and opened it noiselessly.

The corridor without was nearly dark, but his sharp eyes saw a crouching figure among the shadows there.

It was squatted like a toad in one corner.

Smiling to himself, the Unknown turned back and shut the door.

"Those eyes may have seen me hide the pages," he said. "They may have watched me to this room. If they have, and have seen me secrete the pages, the secret is not safe."

When he looked again, the figure was gone, and when he went back to where he had left the old man, the little dried-up figure still occupied the sofa, and it were hard to tell if it had moved a mite since he left.

Ten minutes later the Unknown was out of the house, and then the man on the sofa was endowed with sudden life.

He sprang up like a tiger suddenly roused and went to the door which the Unknown had locked behind him.

He opened it with a strange-looking key which he took from his pocket, and went straight to the niche in the wall. Here, for a moment only, he was puzzled, and when he found the secret button and saw the niche open before him, he grinned like a hyena.

In another instant he had thrust his dark hand into the opening, and clutched something which he drew forth.

His eyes glittered like sparks of flame. His hands had ceased to tremble and were steady.

Back to the room he had left he bore the find, and bent over it in the light of the fire in the grate.

All of a sudden a shadow fell on the wall behind him.

The old man heard it not.

The next moment a hand which was gloved was thrust down over his shoulder and clutched the paper he was reading.

With the howl of a baffled demon the old man sprang up and glared at the person whose hand was at his throat.

"You would rob me, would you?" cried the new-comer. "I thought you had tracked me to my room. I don't care what you are—I don't care if you have tracked the enemies of your accursed deity across the seas—you shan't despoil me."

The old Indian seemed to wither in the grip of the man who had him by the throat.

He uttered no cry; he only looked out of a pair of demon eyes and glared at the papers which had been snatched from his hands.

When the new-comer crept from the place, a human body lay in the light of the fire, and if Iris or the detective had seen it, they would have seen more than a dead face on the hearth.

On the face of old Sakkar was the imprint of a human hand, but the thumb was but half a thumb.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MAN BEYOND THE WALL.

GIDEON GRIP came out of the dark swoon, into which he had been thrown by the pain of his fall through the trap in the House of the Grinning God, and stood leaning against a stone wall wondering where he was, as he tried to recall the last adventures through which he had passed.

The gloom that pervaded the place prevented him from seeing how large it was, and he had to use his fingers as eyes.

This he did to the best advantage he could, and came to the conclusion that he was in a subterranean place, but how deep he did not know.

His escape from death seemed miraculous. It was difficult to tell how long he had been

there for time was an unknown quantity to him, and he could not consult his watch.

The place was as still as a tomb, and he listened a long time, hoping to hear some sound by which he could locate himself, but this was not for him to do.

The walls of the underground prison were almost smooth, but he made out here and there certain marks which seemed inscriptions, as if some unfortunate had been there before him.

He tried to read these sentences with his fingers, but he gained nothing by his attempts more than passing an hour or so in doubtful pleasure.

There was no way out of the web of the Indian spider.

In his dilemma he thought of Miriam, and wondered if she would grow tired of waiting for him and seek him at his den.

Perhaps she would not look for him at all, and it was possible that she had left the house of mystery to prevent keeping her appointment with him.

With thoughts of this nature to keep him company, the buried ferret passed the long hours which he cursed.

Who was overhead? What had become of the owner of the maimed thumb which had touched him in the dark, and where was Iris, whom he had seen in the mystic light of the Black Hand?

All at once the detective heard a noise which startled him.

He heard it again, and observed that it seemed to come through one of the walls by which he was surrounded.

Was there another dungeon beyond the one he occupied, and did it contain a captive like his own?

He leaned against the cold wall and drank in every inflection of the sound.

It was like a man listening to the gnawing of a rat which he believes will bring him liberty if kept up.

For some time he listened, and made out that the sound came from some place beyond the wall and toward the house which adjoined the dwelling of the Grinning God.

It was not so much the gnawing of a rat as it was the squeaking of a file.

He felt like striking on the wall and asking who was on the other side, but he refrained.

All at once the noise stopped as suddenly as he had heard it.

The silence that followed was startling.

Gideon Grip fell back and held his breath.

"Has the workman stopped and in the name of heaven is there another fly in the web?" he ejaculated.

Presently tick, tick went the same noise and then it dropped into the old monotonous scraping.

"That is a human rat," said the detective. "I am going to bail him."

The next moment he tapped on the wall, easy at first, but a little bolder as he waited a second. The scraping stopped.

"He heard me," he said, under his breath. "He is waiting for me to go on again."

He resumed his tapping and all at once it was answered from the other side of the wall.

"Who are you?"

Gideon has placed his lips close to the wall and spoken above a whisper.

"If you wait a moment I think I will tell you to your satisfaction."

The detective felt his heart beat as never before.

The work of the person beyond the wall went on and Gideon waited with eager interest.

Minutes seemed hours to him and seconds even doubled themselves in the darkness.

At last it seemed to the ferret that the end was near for the unseen stopped and tapped on the wall.

"What is it?" asked Gideon.

"In a minute."

Presently the wall seemed to part in the smallest particular and the next moment something sharp struck his hand.

The implement wielded by the unseen was through!

Gideon Grip felt like uttering a cry of joy, but restrained himself and fell back, holding his breath.

"Help me!" said a voice.

The detective went to work and with the help of the man on the other side made the hole large enough to admit the passage of a human body.

"I am coming through now," was the next he heard from the unseen and then he was conscious of hearing some one crawl into his dungeon.

"Who are you?" he eagerly asked.

"What, haven't you a match?"

Gideon was forced to admit that he was without so much as the stub of a lucifer, whereupon the stranger sighed and then laughed.

"Well, it's all one. I'm not so devilish pretty," he said. "I guess you won't lose anything by not getting a peep at me just now."

"But you are somebody who has been cooped up—"

"I should say so, and you—"

"I am Gideon Grip."

The name seemed to startle the man in the dark.

"Not Gideon Grip, the detective?" he cried.

"Yes, do you know me?"

"Certainly. And you fell into the web of the Indian spider? You took the bait that lured you into the meshes? Well, it beats me, and I'm not the gigantic fool I thought I was."

"But you haven't told me anything about yourself. Why would you be the Black Hand's victim?"

"That's what you want to know, eh?"

"Yes."

"It's a short story, but an exciting one. My name is Hark Hudson. I was born in India thirty-three years ago. I wanted to know everything about the doings of the secret sects of that accursed country; but there is a good deal I never found out," and the speaker laughed.

"When I suddenly discovered on the street one day a man whom I thought I had seen in India—an old priest who used to mystify me in Benares—I followed him like a dog, and tracked him to the old house somewhere above us. Not satisfied with that, I must enter the place and poke my head into danger."

"Like myself," said Gideon Grip.

"Of course. Well, I came across the old man sooner than I wanted to form his acquaintance, and in a moment I was surrounded by all the magic of the East. There were serpents that ran over the floor with fire darting from them, yet they did not burn anything. I managed to find my way to a corridor where I caught up a stick and threatened to brain the man who had followed me. Gods, I see him yet—a tall, handsome fellow who looked only about half Indian. He wore gloves that shone in the dark, and wherever he placed his hand I could see a mark of fire which was the exact imprint of fingers and thumb."

"Was it a whole thumb?" asked the breathless Gideon, who had not missed one word of this strange narrative.

"It looked very short, I recall that now; but never mind that—it is immaterial."

The Gotham detective did not think so, but he did not interrupt Hark Hudson.

"I went at him with the stick, but before I could reach him out went his hand, and down I went like a stone."

"Into the place from which you have just escaped?"

"No. I did not fall very far, but in a moment the ground opened beneath me, and I took another tumble or rather a slide. Then I landed where I was when you heard me digging with a piece of steel for life and liberty."

"It was hard work Hudson, eh?"

"It was desperate, but I would have worked my hands off to the wrists to pick my way out of that place of gloom. When I got out of their clutches—I mean when I break through the web of the Indian spider—I think I'll emigrate, for this won't be a healthy climate for me."

"We must get out."

"Yes; but you haven't told me your story, Gideon Grip."

The detective proceeded and narrated all he thought it was right the man should hear and at the end of the story he felt a hand at his wrist.

"You would better abandon the trail," said the voice in the dark.

"Why abandon it?"

"Because there is too much infernal magic connected with the houses up there. You can't fight a man like the one I saw in the corridor. You can't make headway against the Black Hand. It is bound to win, and from what I know of it, it is merciless."

"We will see about that when we are once more above ground," said Gideon Grip.

"That means that you are going to fight it. It means more than that for you."

There was no answer.

For some time the two men thus strangely met stood in the dark, speaking not, but each one busy with his thoughts and when Gideon spoke again his voice had a strange sound.

"How long were you in the old house?" he asked.

"Probably half an hour."

"Did you see no one but the man with the magic hand?"

"That was all, but I heard the voice of a woman and would have discovered her if I had not met with the ill-fated adventure that consigned me to this place."

"The voice of a woman?"

"A young girl's, rather. I heard it distinctly and was listening with all ears, trying to make out from whence it came, when I got into trouble. It seemed to me that somebody was going through with something like an incantation, that some one was under a weird influence, for the girl was talking like one talks in a dream and I could make out here and there a word. 'Tell me, Iris,' said the voice of a man, 'tell me what you see now. Tell me if the detective is on the trail and what he looks like.'"

"Did you hear such words?" cried Gideon Grip.

"I heard them plainly and the girl—"

"What did she say?"

Before Hark Hudson could reply the roof of

the dungeon seemed to open and the two men looking up, saw above them in a blaze of mystic light the grinning face of a man.

"Gods! that is the man whose hand makes a mark wherever it falls!" cried Hudson falling back with a blanched face and chattering teeth.

CHAPTER XVII.

SOMEWHAT STARTLING.

THE two prisoners of the dungeon gazed at the apparition overhead, and wondered amid profound silence what it meant.

Hark Hudson had declared it to be the face of the man whose touch was fatal, and the detective recognized it as the face of Paradox, the man he had caught with Captain Derrick the night the hunted man lost his life in the new hiding-place.

Was Paradox the Man with the Maimed Thumb?

For a few seconds the eyes looked down upon the two men, and the strange light revealed the whole face, then it was withdrawn, and darkness once more settled down upon them.

"We shall hear from them now," said the ferret's fellow-captive. "We shall feel the hand of the infamous Order, and it looks as though we are destined to perish like rats in a trap."

It looked so to the Secret Shadower, but he did not give away his fears, and the man who stood near him in the gloom was silent.

"Let us go back into my nest and see what we can do there," suddenly exclaimed Hudson.

They crept through the opening in the wall, and the detective's companion guided him to a certain spot, and told him that beyond the wall at that point seemed to lie another cellar like the one in which they were.

"Why not try here, then?" said Gideon Grip.

"Sound the wall."

The ferret did so, but drew no comfort from the investigation.

"This must not stop us," he said. "We must get out of this trap, or perish miserably where we are."

Five minutes later they were at work, trying to dig under the wall that rose before them. They had nothing but the sharp bit of steel which Hudson had discovered in the dark, and their own hands.

What would they find beyond the wall when they got there? Would an avenue of escape be opened up to them, or would they but find themselves as deep as ever in the web of the mystic spider?

Every now and then the detective or Hudson would go back to the other dungeon, and watch for the opening of the trap-door in the ceiling.

They seemed to dread the eye they had seen above them in the singular glare, but as it remained aloof they took courage and worked on.

Fortune for once seemed to favor both the detective and the young adventurer.

They got beneath the wall; they wriggled their bodies through the tunnel they made, and came up in another room as dark as the one they had left.

"This is another part of the trap," said Hudson, disconsolately. "We have only reached for our pains another room of the dungeon of doom, and rats we are until the cat comes and catches us."

Gideon Grip, feeling the walls of the new dungeon, made no reply. He was making a circuit of the place in the dark, feeling every inch of the walls with eyes in his fingers, as it were, and every sense on the alert.

All at once he stopped and turned to where he thought Hudson stood.

What had he discovered?

"Come here, Hudson."

In an instant the adventurer was at his side.

"Here is a door."

"No! Not a door in this wall?"

"Feel here. Let me have your hand."

"Heavens, you are right! There is a door here, but it is as solid as a rock."

"It has been walled up, that is all," answered the detective. "It seems to have served its purpose and was closed years ago perhaps."

"We can't force it."

Hudson was losing hope.

"We must force it! Beyond this door is liberty. Once beyond it and we will be out of the trap of the Black Hands."

"Do you think so?"

"It must be so. There are but two houses inhabited by the enemy, and the room beyond this door must be out of the pale."

They attacked this new barrier and worked an hour without making an impression.

Hudson fell back and cursed aloud the fate which had thrown him into the accursed trap.

"This is what a fellow gets for poking his nose into business that doesn't concern him."

"But it concerns me," said the detective.

"Oh, yes; you went out in order to solve a mystery which you have had in hand. You want to know who killed Dorsey Drake."

"I will know!"

"Then, you must force that door yonder."

"I know that."

"Not only that, but you must go further than that: you must get out of this underground hell. You must meet with your hand

which can only clutch, not kill, the hand whose mark is death."

"You are right, Hudson," was the answer. "I promise you that I will meet that hand and beat it at its own game."

"But it is not alone. It has help, help as deadly as it is itself. You don't know what is behind that fatal touch."

"I will find out."

"Why was Drake, the nabob, killed, if killed he really was?"

"He was after the secrets of the five old books written in some ancient cipher of the far East."

"For no other reason? You are a detective Gideon Grip."

"Dorsey Drake was killed for another reason and, once out of this trap, I will show the world why."

"But you won't tell me?" laughed Hudson.

There was no reply for a moment and the ferret looked toward the man whom he could not see for the darkness that filled the old chamber.

"You won't tell me," repeated the man near him.

"I will tell you but not here," said Gideon. "You don't seem to acknowledge my title to my own secrets."

There was a quick turn on Hudson's part and the next moment the Secret Shadower felt a hand at his wrist.

"I do, but you don't trust me—that is it."

"I don't know you, Hudson. I only know what you have told me about your life. You have been a secret-hunter by your own confession; you tried to get at the secrets of the Black Hands and that is why you fell into the trap that caught us both."

"We'll drop this for the present and go back to work."

Gideon Grip was willing and they return to their attack on the walled-up door.

After awhile they seemed to make headway and when they paused again they believed that they would soon be beyond the portal.

In this they were not mistaken, and at last they dragged their bodies into another chamber as dark as the first.

Half an hour later two men crept from the mouth of a cellar and drew their soil-stained forms up into the glare of a lamp.

Out at last!

Gideon and his companion looked at one another and felt their blood leap through their veins.

Out of the House of the Grinning God and once more under the lamps of Gotham!

They did not remain long on the spot of their exit, but hastened away and parted in the shadows, Hudson to return to the little house he had left for the almost fatal adventure and Gideon Grip to slip back to his little den.

The detective felt like a new man.

He ran up the steps and opened the door.

The room was dark and he struck a light.

"They have been here!" he exclaimed, taking in the room in a sweeping glance. "They have been looking for the links I have picked up," and he fell to work investigating the doings of the hands that had been to the room during his absence.

The detective was thus engaged when he was startled by a footstep beyond the door and crossing the room with a determined look he opened it and leaned toward the figure on the threshold.

"You, Miriam?" he cried. "Come in," and in another second the Woman Across the Street was in his den.

Miriam still showed the effects of her last adventure when she fled from the face of the Man with the Valise, and for a moment she stood and trembled in the detective's presence.

"I have been here before, but you were not here," she said.

"No," smiled Gideon "I was detained elsewhere on important business."

The woman sat down and for a moment looked without speaking into the man's face.

"I have left the house," she said.

"What has happened?"

The recollection of the last scenes there sent a shudder over her frame.

"I wouldn't go back for the world. The house is more than haunted. I am in hiding now—hiding from a crime and the hand of a man."

"From a crime? How?"

Miriam told everything and the detective listened without interrupting her.

"Do you think the draught killed Zuleika?" he asked at the end of the story.

"I am sure it did."

"And you are sure that the man you encountered on the street was the Man with the Valise?"

"I could not have been mistaken. He came upon me when I was flying from the other scene and I fled from him."

"Are you ready to tell me your story now?" asked Gideon. "You recollect that I was to meet you at Iris's house and you were to tell me everything?"

"I made that promise I know—"

"But you wish to break it!"

The woman was silent.
"Miriam, does the telling of your story reveal the true reasons for your long vigils at the window opposite Dorsey Drake's house?"

She looked at him with a sudden start.
"Who told you?" she cried.
"You do not answer and I have a right to my opinion."

"My God, must I tell you that well-kept secret?" and she clasped her hands and grew pale.

"I won't press you, Miriam, but, as I live, every secret connected with this mystery is to be made clear, no matter what stands in my way!"

Miriam Marx seemed to turn away and threw a glance toward the door.

In another moment she was upon her feet, her tall figure erect and a pair of burning eyes fastened on the cool detective who was letting her have her way.

"You will find it out, anyhow, so why should I keep it back?" she suddenly cried. "There is no keeping anything from a man like you, Gideon Grip. You have no mercy; you are as merciless as the Silent Circle and the Black Hands. I watched at that window for six long months. I seldom left my post, but kept it through thick and thin."

"Watching Dorsey Drake, the hunted victim of the Hand?"

"Yes, but he was more than that. Ah, I see there is one secret with which you are not yet familiar, but you are very near it now."

She took a nervous turn across the room, watched like a lynx by the Secret Shadower, and when she came back to him her face was tensely drawn, as if by a spasm of pain, and he saw that her hands were buried in her bloodless palms.

"I was the spy of the Silent Circle, which is the foe of the Black Hands," she said, bending over him with her blazing eyes. "I have been in its grip for years, but that is not all. I was playing spy at that window on my own account. I was trying to shield that man from the doom that impended."

"Trying to shield him? You?" cried Gideon Grip.

"Yes. I was watching the enemy as well as playing a hand for the Silent Circle."

"Then, you must have thought something of Dorsey Drake."

She seemed to smile. Drawing back a pace, she looked at the detective and studied his astonishment for a second.

"Did you ever hear that Dorsey Drake was married?" she asked at last.

"I know that."

"Ha, you found that out, did you?" she exclaimed.

"Yes."

"Do you know what became of his wife?"

"There is in the library a record of her death. I found it among his private papers."

"He married after he came back from India."

"The date of the marriage tells that."

"He married because he thought he had found a woman who could help him find the elixir of life."

"Well?"

Miriam laid her hand on the detective's arm, and her face came closer than ever.

"You have never been sharp enough to discover this wife?" she said.

There was no answer.

"Let me solve this little mystery now, Gideon Grip. I am that woman!"

The detective started, and looking up into the face above him, saw that it was cool and collected.

"Before God, the Avenger, I am Dorsey Drake's widow!"

"And the mother of Iris?"

"Yes."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SHADOW'S BOLD PLAY.

If Gideon Grip had suspected this, which he had not, he would have fallen back from the woman's face all the same.

"You know now why I watched at the window," said Miriam. "I am not old, but old enough to be the mother of that girl who is in the coils of the Black Hands. I was very young when I became the wife of Dorsey Drake, but our happiness did not last long. It was rudely broken shortly after Iris's birth, and we drifted apart, I leaving him the child, and he going back to the bane of his life, his foolish search for the elixir which, instead of keeping life in his body, let out the soul that dark night. Iris dreams not of my relation to her. She never was told who her mother was, and Dorsey Drake died without revealing the secret in any way."

"How could you live under the same roof with your child without betraying yourself?"

"I made steel of my nerves," was the answer. "I looked at her with eyes other than those of a mother's. I never told her by word or deed that she might be near the woman who brought her into the world. It cost me many a pang, but I carried it out. I was not the mother there. I was simply Miriam, the spy of the Silent Circle. When I saw the Man with the Valise come out of the house that night, I could

have sworn that a dead man was behind him, and I saw the boy Iris sent for you. You have seen something of woman's work in your time. You don't know how I longed to enter that house and, folding my child to my heart, tell her all, and then stand in the presence of the dead."

Gideon Grip waited for the woman to proceed. "Enough of this! The story of what I know may come later on. I am still in the grip of the Silent Circle."

"And hunted by the Black Hand, too?"

"Yes."

"Do you think the Hands know that you are Dorsey Drake's wife?"

"There is no telling what they don't know. The man whose hand leaves a mark is cunning and deadly. He has for a comrade in this game of mystery and death the head of the old band which lost the book of secret years ago in India. They call him Sakkar."

"Who told you this, Miriam?"

"The head of the Silent Circle—the sworn enemy of the Black Hands."

"And you want to get beyond its reach?"

"I do. I have hid from the face of Paradox, that's what they call him."

"The Man with the Valise?"

"Yes. I say I have been hiding ever since I saw him on the street. He has the step of the panther and the hand of death. You did not see it on my husband's face, but Iris did."

"I saw it on Derrick's skin and on the wall alongside the stairs leading to his room."

"It leaves a mark wherever it falls—that is the dread virtue it contains. The man who owns that hand is at once the fiend of more than one crime."

"Is he an East Indian, Miriam?"

"How should I know? I have never been near him; that is, I have never been let into the secrets of his life. I know from what our chief says that he is at the real head of the Black Hands."

"But the stealthy footstep that follows the marked victims of the Brotherhood?"

"That is not his. You forget old Sakkar."

"The person who admitted me to the House of the Grinning God was an old man."

"Wiry and thin, but looking strong for all that?"

"Yes."

"That was Sakkar, the priest of Vishkar—that was the man who promised to follow Drake and Derrick until they were dead—slain under the eye of the Brotherhood."

"But when does the Man with the Deadly Hand come into the game?"

Miriam clutched the detective's arm.

"I will tell you. That man has another motive. He is playing a two-handed game. He has the power to mesmerize and charm. You know him the serpent charms the bird that approaches it? That is the way Paradox works."

"He has found his bird, then?"

"Heavens, yes! You say you saw at the House of the Grinning God the figure of Iris in a mystic light?"

"I did."

"It was Iris. It was my child, deep in the coils of the Black Hands. What will the outcome be if the Hand is permitted to go on? Iris will become the wife of Paradox."

"But she has a lover."

"What of that? He knows nothing of what has occurred beyond the mention of Dorsey Drake's death. He will not be back for a month and Paradox is playing his game. He belongs to the Hand for a purpose. He has been to India. He met there the old man called Sakkar. He drew himself into his confidence, Heaven knows how, for when Sakkar went that far he broke one of his oaths. Well, Paradox, the Man with the Valise, is gaining a foothold on Iris's heart."

"But why does the girl go to the House of the Grinning God?"

"The spell, the spell of that accursed power!" cried Miriam. "You cannot estimate its grip."

"It must be terrible."

"It is more than terrible. You have never seen the inside of the secret room which Iris has fitted up in Indian style in her own home. You have never seen her swallow the mysterious drug which changes skin and nature and drives her to the nest of Sakkar and there makes her, for the time, a priestess of Vishkar."

"Woman, this sounds like a dream," said the ferret. "Over in India, where all is mysticism, it would not appear so startling, but here in America—in the heart of New York—"

"Here it looks impossible, does it?" broke in the woman. "I know it does, but it is true. You should see Iris in her double life. When she is herself she wants you to hunt down the hand that took the life of the man she called her guardian, for she knows not the true relationship that exists between them; but there are times in her life when she is another person—when she is, to all intents and purposes the slave of the goddess Vishkar."

Gideon Grip looked toward the door and was in the act of quitting his chair when Miriam, with a slight cry, bounded across the room and halted with her hand on the latch.

"Did you hear it, too?" she cried. "Did you hear the footstep of the old panther with the tawny skin?—the stealthy tread of Sakkar, the hunter? I did."

The detective was at her side and he opened the door.

No one was there.

"He comes and goes like a shadow," she laughed. "That is a secret which he guards with consummate skill. It will depart from him only when he dies, if he ever succumbs to death."

Miriam and the ferret stood together looking down the steps that led to the street below, seeing nothing but here and there passing feet on the sidewalk.

"Don't you think Iris should be aroused?" he asked.

"What, told that she is in the grip of a power from which ere long there will be no escape?"

"Yes."

"I dare not tell her," and Miriam shrunk back from the man of trails. "I dare not enter that house again. You know under what circumstances I fled from it? You know that I left Zuleika on the floor with her wild death-stricken eyes glaring at me—dead, in part, by her own hand, I know, but I see her all the time. No—no, I dare not tell her!"

"But the hand might close for the last time on Iris. The man with the fatal touch might make her his wife."

There was no answer. The face of the watchful woman grew whiter than ever, and the detective waited for her to recover.

"Iris should be warned, but would she believe? She swallows the strange drug and becomes the priestess of Vishkar, and when its effects pass off she is Iris once more—the girl who wants you to hunt down the Black Hand."

"I shall go straight to the mark now," said Gideon Grip.

"I need not warn you."

"No, Miriam, you need not. I have been in the clutches of the Black Hand. I have seen the fiery serpents of magic in the House of the Grinning God. I have felt on my throat the same hand which I believe was the last one that ever touched Dorsey Drake—the hand with the maimed thumb."

"It has a maimed thumb," said Miriam.

"I have picked up, link after link, of the chain of guilt. I have never had a case like this one."

"No man-hunter ever had."

"I realize that it is a dangerous one, that I am now under the ban, that I will be hunted by the owner of the hand that leaves a mark wherever it falls, especially on the human skin. This man is now known to me as Paradox, and a paradox he is—a paradox of mystery and crime."

"Yes," smiled Miriam Marx, "and until your hand has him fairly in its grip I will not be safe."

"You must hide."

"Derrick hid from him. You found Captain Derrick a place which you thought secure, yet the Hand found the poor wretch, and on his face you saw the mark that startled Iris. Gideon Grip, there is nothing in this game for you—no reward to be expected, Iris is really poor. The money which Dorsey Drake won he spent in his foolish experiments. They called him rich, but he was not. The Black Hand cares not for riches, for Paradox has access to the riches of the East, for is he not hand in glove with Sakkar, who has but to ask to have placed in his lap the wealth of the Brotherhood of Vishkar?"

"I ask no reward more than the pleasure to be derived from the knowledge of standing victorious at the end of this famous mystery, and saving Iris from the grip of the Black Hands."

"The trail lies before you," said Miriam. "If you fail I swear to take it up."

"You, Miriam?"

"I swear it! I can find this man—I can ferret out the secret disguises he assumes and can discover him at work."

"The Hand might touch you," smiled the detective.

"True," and the woman shuddered in spite of herself. "I have counted everything. I know what it can do for I have seen its work. They live together in the House of the Grinning God. Old Sakkar, as tawny as a black lion, has the courage of one and the wisdom of a serpent. Paradox knows all about the mysteries of his dark arts; he had woven the coils about Iris, and the girl is completely in his power. The drug which she swallows changes her into an Indian—"

"Where does she obtain it?"

"Ask the two men who inhabit the house of St. L—street; ask old Sakkar and his imp!"

"But there must be an end to this supply."

"The chief of the Silent Circle says that Iris carries in her little box all there is of the drug in this country."

"Do you believe that, Miriam?"

"I don't know, but why not? Sometimes I think that the Silent Circle is as cunning and powerful as the Black Hand. They remind me of two tigers hunting each other in the jungles. The head of the Circle knows that Iris has pos-

session of the box and the vial; he wanted me to steal it."

"Well?"

"I could not go back to that house with the memory of Zuleika lying dead on the floor."

"Where is the box?"

"It stands on the oriental dresser in the secret room."

"Give me the secret of getting to that chamber."

Miriam looked at the detective as if she could not credit the evidence of her ears.

"Are you going to rob Iris?" she asked.

"Isn't it the only way to break the spell, if she has all of the mystic drug?"

"But the risk—the risk to Iris?"

"We must take risks, Miriam. We must play as bold a hand as is being played by the infamous Brotherhood of Vishkar. Will you, or will you not, tell me how to find that room?"

Miriam drew toward her a bit of paper, and began to draw thereon a diagram of the whole interior of the house on the avenue.

Gideon Grip looked on silent until she had finished.

"I think I can find it," he said. "Now, woman, go back to your covert. Keep out of the way of that hand."

"And you," she said, touching him, "you do the same. For if you fail us the game is lost, and the death-toucher will complete his work!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE BREAKING OF THE SPELL.

GIDEON GRIP now did something never done before in his detective career.

He had listened to the feet of Miriam as they went down the stair and out into the night.

He knew that the hunted creature had gone back to her hiding-place, and that she dreaded the power of the Black Hand, which seemed to have overshadowed her life like a tree of death.

He locked his door after Miriam, and took writing materials from a drawer in the table.

He put down the whole story of his hunt up to the present hour. He began at the beginning, the death of Dorsey Drake, and followed himself step by step through the hunt for the mysterious murderer. He told a good deal about the dead man's past; he brought in the discovery and death of Derrick, narrated his own adventures in the House of the Grinning God, and said something about Miriam and Iris.

Indeed, there was little to be guessed at at the end of the narrative spun in his den by the bloodhound of New York, and more than two hours passed over his head ere he rose and called his work finished.

"If I don't come out of this hunt alive—if the Hand gets the better of me, and I feel its touch to my own destruction—some one else can take up the trail where I leave off, and follow it to the end," he said. "I have here detailed everything a detective should know. I don't think I have skipped one important detail. All, all is here, and I know that the man to whom I shall leave this is capable of avenging me if any one is."

He sealed all this and placed it in an envelope, which he in turn made fast, then addressed it to another detective, and with it in his bosom, turned down the light and went out.

Half an hour later a man, sleeping in a small room much like the den the detective occupied, was awakened by a rap, and getting up, he found at his door the face of Gideon Grip.

"Here, take this, and keep it sealed for at least a week. If at the end you don't hear from me, open it and act."

"But—"

"No questions, Captain 'Cerberus,'" said Gideon, drawing back. "I am off. Pleasant dreams," and leaving the ferret to stare at what he held in his hand, he went down the steps and once more was on the trail of the Black Hand.

With agile tread Gideon Grip turned his face toward Iris's home.

He had memorized the diagram which Miriam had drawn for him, and with the full intention of finding the hidden apartment, he entered the house on the avenue, wondering whom he would meet there, if any one.

The dim light burning at all times in the house greeted him as he climbed the stair, and when he found himself in the upper hall he stopped and listened.

The location of Iris's chamber was known to him; but he had another mission than listening there.

This time there was no Miriam to come up the steps and surprise him by touching a secret button in the wall; and as he thought of the struggle in the laboratory, he wondered what had become of the body of Zuleika the maid.

By and by the keen eye of the detective, guided by the diagram, found the hidden button and a door slowly opened and he looked into a room the presence of which he would not have suspected had it not been for the Woman Across the Street.

He entered without hesitation and closed the softly folding portal after him.

A very dim light burning near the wall disclosed enough of the chamber to tell him that he

was in the hidden one, for tiger-skins covered the floor and the grining visages of strange beings in ebony surrounded him on every side.

Gideon Grip stood for a little while amid these surroundings and then moved toward the rich oriental dresser whose outlines he could make out by the light.

He had come to rob Iris of the mysterious drug which changed her nature for a time and which she swallowed whenever she desired to enter the House of the Grinning God.

He knew the danger connected with the step he had taken, that he crossed the threshold of a room never before profaned by the foot of man; but the game was worth the candle.

The silence of the tomb seemed to pervade the whole house.

A less courageous man than Gideon Grip would have heard his own heart beat, but he had steeled it anew and was ready for the desperate and the dark.

He stood at the dresser with his eyes fastened on a tiny black box which stood there between two strange things that looked like skulls cut in black ivory.

It was not much longer than his hand and about five inches high.

Was it true that Iris kept in such an exposed place the drug to which she came on certain occasions?

Any thief could carry it off, could even hide it in his pocket; but perhaps she relied on the secrecy connected with the hidden chamber.

After eying the box for awhile the ferret reached out his hand and touched it.

At the same moment he received a shock like that from an electric battery and he fell back with a start.

"What infernal magic is in this room?" he exclaimed. "But pshaw! I am here to save Iris and a shock sha'n't keep me from my work."

Again he laid his hand on the box and took it up.

It was not heavy and when he carried it nearer the light he saw that it had in the lid a setting of oriental gems.

Gideon Grip opened the black box and saw lying on a pillow of emerald a little bottle which his eager fingers grasped.

"Miriam was right. It is here, sure enough," he said.

In another moment he had the bottle out of the box and was holding it up before the tiny blaze of gas.

It seemed to be nearly full of a colorless liquid which appeared thick and lazy in flow and he looked at it for some time.

"What can't those mystics do in India?" he remarked. "There is no telling what is in this bottle, but we know enough to know that it contains the work of a human devil."

All at once he heard a sound that made him turn instantly and with the vial in his hand he drew back and looked across the room at the person who had come in.

There in the light stood a figure which attracted the detective from the very first.

It was Iris!

The tall form of the handsome girl was visible in the light that prevailed and the ferret saw how white she was.

A man in the secret room!

Who had found the hidden button and profaned the precincts of the tiger-rugged chamber?

For some time neither Iris nor the detective stirred.

Suddenly the figure of the young girl came forward and her hand went out toward the vial.

"Give me what you hold in your hand!" she cried. "You must not rob me."

The detective smiled. She had not recognized him.

"What do you want of it?" he asked and then with a cry she fell back, her beautiful eyes seeming to fly from her head and her form in a tremble.

"Is it you? Are you the invader of this room?"

She stood like a statue near the door and Gideon Grip advancing, answered:

"I come to save you, Iris. I am here in the interest of justice and vengeance."

She did not seem to comprehend, for her face twitched and her hand was bleeding.

"You must go! Justice and vengeance are not in this room," she cried. "The trail you seek is not here. Go! I am mistress here and under this roof, if nowhere else, I will be obeyed."

Her quivering finger pointed toward the door and the detective looking at her, saw how excited she was.

"Iris, you don't know the web into which they have dragged you. You are in the toils and this accursed room—"

"Silence! I am mistress here."

"But you sent for me the morning of the eleventh; you said to me: 'Dorsey Drake has been murdered. Hunt down the band that touched him.' You saw on his face the mark of the hand of murder; you persisted in this declaration and I was inclined to call it a delusion, but since I have seen the mark myself, and I have been in the toils of the Black Hand,"

"You have?"

"Yes. I know something about the motive that led to Dorsey Drake's death—I know that you have been drawn into the coils of the serpent which came from the land of the cobra and the home of the Thugs. I have picked up, link by link, the chain of guilt; I have discovered that the hand which touched Dorsey Drake is enmeshing you—"

"I am not in the game at all. I am but Iris, the child of unknown parents, for he would never reveal my parentage. I have set you on the trail of crime. I have told you that I want the murderer of my guardian brought to light. You once told me that whenever I was in trouble I should come to you."

"But you are in danger now."

"In danger? I?"

"You! In my hand I hold the cause of much of it. I have taken from you box the vial of sin and mystery."

"Who gave you the secret key to this room?"

There was no reply. The fair girl was fast becoming bolder, as if she realized the desperation of the battle she was fighting with her own ferret and she came toward the detective.

"You have tracked me!" she cried.

"I have not, but I have seen. I have never dogged your footsteps from this house, but I have picked up the trail nevertheless. You must not blame me for doing that, girl."

Once more her eyes fell to the vial and became fixed there.

"Do you want this, Iris?" asked the ferret.

She held out her hand.

"Is this all there is of this drug?"

"It is all. There is not a drop in this country outside of that bottle."

"If you lose it the spell is broken, eh?"

"The spell? What spell?"

Iris passed her hand before her eyes like a person in a trance.

She seemed to reel.

"For God's sake, don't rob me!" she wailed.

"Will you take from me all that is life in this world? Will you, you, Gideon Grip, sworn to avenge my wrongs, snatch from me the elixir that makes me forget the touch of the Black Hand—"

"But which makes of you a priestess of Vishkar?" he broke in. "I will do even that, Iris."

The next moment something flew from the detective's hand. It spun across the room and struck the wall with the sharp shiver of shattered glass.

It was the bottle, and the spot it left on the wall was dark a moment and then faded out.

Iris uttered a wild cry and staggered toward the place where the bottle had broken. Her limbs seemed to lose their power there and with a determined effort she glued her lips to the spot and tried to drink in the fumes that rose from the liquid.

Gideon Grip looked at her a moment and then turned toward the light.

At that moment he heard a noise which took him to the concealed door; he reached up and touched the button, for he would leave the girl to herself now that he had rescued her from the power of the strange drug.

A minute later he was on the stair and halfway down he stopped and looked over the balustrade.

In the light below stood Zuleika, the maid.

"I wish you could see this, Miriam," said the ferret to himself. "I wish you could see your victim alive."

All at once a man appeared at Zuleika's side, and the detective drawing back eyed him with the scrutiny of a tiger.

"Tis he!" he cried. "It is the owner of the maimed thumb. It is Paradox!"

He saw the tall and handsome man bend over Zuleika and clutch her wrist.

"Are you sure there is no man in the house?" he heard. "Do you know the detective? Have you never seen Gideon Grip, the ferret Iris put on the trail?"

What Zuleika said he did not hear, but he saw Paradox send a lightning look up the stairs.

CHAPTER XX.

MIRIAM'S MIDNIGHT VISITOR.

GIDEON GRIP fell back to the wall.

He did not want to encounter that man in that house.

He glided to the hidden button which on a former visit he had seen Miriam press and in a moment he had vanished.

What Paradox did in the house he knew not.

He left it by the secret stairs and in a short time was out on the streets of Gotham.

He had been successful. He had broken the bottle which held the powerful agent of the Black Hand and Iris was out of the spell.

At least he fondly believed, solemnly thought so.

Meantime Miriam Marx, clinging to the shadows of street and alley, had gone home.

She had buried herself from the Black Hand in a house hard for the shrewdest detective to find, and there she hoped that the eye of the spy would not find her out.

When she reached the house she locked the

door and sat down. The room was cheerless, but what of that? It was home and a hiding-place.

She thought over what she had told the detective and wondered if he would be successful in his attempt to rob Iris.

Iris was her child. The secret was out at last—torn from her by necessity, and she had not omitted anything in her past life.

Would she ever get to fold Iris to her heart—to tell her all about her mother's life?

She did not know. She almost feared not.

The night wore and Miriam, chilled though she knew it not, for her thoughts chased from her all feeling of cold, sat in the same chair.

At last she started up.

"It must be midnight and I haven't felt the flight of time," she exclaimed. "I wonder if the detective has returned. If it weren't for showing myself on the street, I would go back to his den. I want to know if he went to Iris's house—if he found the secret room and robbed her of the drug."

She went to the window and looked down into the alley where but little light lay.

It was full of shadows and Miriam standing there did not see the one which was not thrown by anything inanimate.

Crouched in one corner of a niche of the uneven alley was a man whose eye had not left the window of the hunted woman for some time.

His eyes were bright and gleaming and he had seen every shadow on Miriam's panes.

Miriam Marx looked down into the alley for some time, her thoughts as busy as her eyes.

Presently her eyes became busier than ever.

What a place that alley would be for any one to watch the window from!

The idea came to her like a flash of light and remained with her.

She could not get rid of it.

By and by she went to her door and made sure it was bolted.

Then she turned down the light, turned it so low that the whole room was a dense shadow and took the chair.

"I won't go to bed to-night," she said. "I will sit up till morning for there is no telling who might come."

Miriam had a dread of the Black Hand. She feared that, having told her story to the detective, she might have had another listener, and that if she closed her eyes, the fatal fingers would come and terminate her existence.

In a short time she heard the striking of a clock and counted twelve strokes.

"I thought so. I have sat up a long time and can hold out till morning," she said, with a faint smile, and her thoughts went back to the detective.

Another hour passed, and she varied the vigil by going to the window and looking down into the alley. It was dark now and all was shadow of the densest sort.

Poor Miriam! With her secret in the keeping of another, she was not safe.

At last there came to her ears a sound which made her start. It was not at the door, but near the window.

She listened and looked, but the outlines of the window as it was to be seen between her and the stars was all that met her gaze.

Five minutes later she knew that some one was on the narrow ledge of roof beneath the sill and that that something was not a cat.

Miriam gradually grew composed. The very desperation of the situation seemed to give her nerve.

She stood erect with something in her hand—something she had not been without for years; a dagger whose point was like the point of a needle.

She took a step toward the window and waited there. The noise was still heard.

In a little while she advanced another step and stopped again.

She could now see that the sash had been raised and felt on her face the cool morning air.

Presently there appeared at the window the outlines of a head which she knew was that of a man.

Miriam leaned toward it and made sure that it was about to be thrust into the house, then, with the agility of a cat, she sprang forward and clutched at the apparition.

There was a sharp cry by the man thus attacked and instead of falling from his perch he lurched forward and, to the woman's horror landed in the room.

All this was the work of a second and when Miriam fell back and stared at her visitor, she felt every drop of blood in her veins congeal.

The man she had met on the street was before her! She faced the dark-faced owner of the maimed thumb!

He bent toward her looking into her face as it was revealed in the spark that burned near the wall and Miriam returned the look.

"Woman, don't you know better than to resist us?" he asked.

There was no answer.

"You are not safe anywhere. You are in the coils of the Hand and yet you fight us with all your might."

Then the woman found her tongue.

"Why shouldn't I fight you?" she said. "Tell

me who has a better right to fight the Black Hand."

She glanced at his hands and saw that they were gloved, that they were slender, almost like her own, but not a vestige of them was to be seen.

"You will tell me what I want to know. You will speak when I ask you a question."

"What is it?"

"You were to see the detective. What has he found out?"

The face of Miriam Marx lighted up with a defiant smile.

"I don't betray him!" she said.

"Ha, you don't? You prefer to feel the touch which you know is fatal?"

He put out his hand as he spoke and Miriam saw that it was the one with the maimed thumb, for that member was short, as if it had lost a joint.

"The time has passed for me to fear your hand," she went on. "An hour ago I would have sat here and let you touch me as I believe you have touched others. But now I am ready to fight to the end, for you have roused the tiger in me—"

"Ha, you have tiger blood in your agile body, Miriam Marx? You had the virtue of patience for months when you sat at the window and watched the house on the avenue."

"But the blood was there. You haven't forgotten the night you entered that house?"

He did not speak.

"I was at home, and if you had opened the door you would have been daggered on the threshold."

"You were waiting for me, then?"

"Yes, I was ready. I would have asked no questions, but I would have finished you on sight."

"Then, it was lucky that I changed my mind. But, let us come back to the detective. You told him something to-night. You set him on the new trail; you made a robber of him."

"Did he find it?" cried Miriam, starting toward him in her eagerness. "Did he break the spell?"

It seemed to her that the face before her grew darker than ever, that the eyes snapped, and the gloved hand moved nearer like a serpent creeping upon its victim.

"Curse you, Miriam Marx, you robbed us by your tongue!" he exclaimed.

"And by my hand as well!" she cried, exultantly. "I drew for him the trail to the secret room."

"You showed him where the hidden button was?"

"Yes, yes."

"Your triumph shall be short-lived. You are now in the shadow of the death others have felt—you are at the edge of the river that flows without a sound."

She threw a quick look around the room.

"But, after all, your work was not very successful. While the ferret carried out your designs, he fell in with the Black Hand."

A strange cry broke over Miriam's lips.

Was it true that the detective had failed to escape from the house after breaking the spell that held Iris in its power? Had he fallen by the fatal hand, and was the same hand to extinguish her life like the snuffing of a candle?

"He did a part of his work well, but the escape failed," said the Maimed Thumb.

"Then you found him?"

"Ha, what a guesser you are, Miriam Marx!"

She said no more. The old fear of the Hand was coming back, and she shuddered, wondering if he noticed it.

Again he came forward. The step he took carried her back almost to the wall.

She could go no further and knew it.

"Woman, you are about to die. You shall lie in the light against your wall with the mark of the Black Hand on your face. You shall feel for the first and last time in your life the touch of the fingers that kill."

Miriam straightened and looked into the face which was very near just then.

"Can I?" passed through her mind. "Has any one ever baffled this infamous hand? If I stand here and look at him a moment longer I shall sink at his feet half dead with fear. I must fight him or die by the touch that killed my husband, Derrick and Gideon Grip."

She threw into the spring that carried her forward the last efforts of a desperate venture.

Miriam Marx, more than half tigress, went at the man, fell upon him like that striped monster and, taking him by surprise, bore him half-way across the room and had him on the window-sill before he could get second breath.

Not a word fell from her lips. She was biting them through in her rage, and the next moment she had seen the body of the midnight visitor fall downward to the bed of the alley.

Then she fell back herself and with a cry that seemed to tear every overstrung nerve she sunk to the floor in a swoon.

Just then the clock struck one.

CHAPTER XXI.

A FATAL BLUNDER.

WHEN Miriam Marx came out of the swoon she looked about her, and by degrees came to

the conclusion that she was still in the little room where she had encountered the Man of the Maimed Thumb, and, best of all, she was out of the death grip.

She remembered having thrown him from the window, and, crossing the chilly apartment, she looked down into the alley, but saw nothing of her visitor.

"The fall did not kill him, for such rascals have as many lives as a cat," said Miriam to herself. "I am not safe here now that he has found me. I must hide again—I must become a fugitive from the shadow of that hand; but whither shall I fly this time?"

She did not know.

She believed that the man had dogged her footsteps from Gideon Grip's den, and if that was true, would he not turn on the detective as well and finish him?

The thought was quite enough to freeze the blood of the half-dead creature, and she waited long and almost breathlessly for day.

It came on leaden wings, but came at last, and Miriam, creeping to the window again, stood there awhile, her white face glued to the pane, while she saw the light brightening the sky above the city.

She did not venture down for a long time. At last, fearing to remain there another moment, lest the same dark hand would come to the door, she disguised herself as well as she could with the poor materials at her command and slipped out.

Miriam argued that the Maimed Thumb would not be on the watch during the day, and, with this hope in her heart, she glided off, taking care to avoid as many people as she could.

She hardly knew where to go.

Indeed, she had no particular hiding-place picked out, for she knew but little of the city. She dared not go back to the vicinity of the detective's den, for the Man with the Maimed Thumb had told her that Gideon Grip had fallen into the power of the Brotherhood, yet she could hardly believe that.

She knew that he had gone to rescue Iris from the spell of the strange drug, that he had made his way to the nabob's house on information which she had given him, but the Unknown had told her that he had fallen into the hands of the enemy.

If that was true—if he had not deliberately lied to her—the game was ended so far as the ferret was concerned, and she—Miriam—was practically helpless as against the Black Hand. In course of time Miriam reached the vicinity of the river.

In the cold light of day it ran black and suggestive to her frightened heart.

She drew near, looking at it as the chilly waters swished against the sodden piers, and all the time found herself being drawn closer by a hand which she could not resist.

Nothing but the thought of Iris, her child, still in the grip of the monster, held her back.

She stood on the very edge of the wharf and looked down at the inviting river.

It had drowned more than one grief, why not hers? It had carried seaward on its merciless bosom more than one secret, and had been a panacea for a thousand human ills, why not for hers?

She drew back with a shudder.

"No, I won't let the accursed water tempt me too far," she said. "I have something to live for. Iris is still in the coils of the serpent, and the detective may be alive."

She retreated, for to have remained there a minute longer would have meant self-destruction, and the thought of Iris and Gideon Grip took her away.

Once more she sought out a new hiding-place.

She was hurrying down a narrow street when she was touched on the arm, and turning with a quick start, she beheld face to face with herself a woman of her own age.

There was a wild, blood-shot eye which told of a night of carousal, but the hand on her sleeve did not loosen its grip, and Miriam looked at the wretched creature with an eye of pity.

"You must be running from the cops," said the woman. "You appear to be fearful of being pulled in, ha, ha, ha!"

Miriam, beating down her first impulses, told the woman that she was not fleeing from the police, and then found herself invited to accompany the woman home.

"I don't live in a palace, but it's home all the same," she said. "I am just around the corner, and there's room for two of us."

"Why not?" thought Miriam. "This may be a God-send. They would never look for me in this part of the city, and would not expect to find me domiciled with this creature."

She signified her willingness to go with the woman, and three minutes later she found herself in a small room which, while indicating poverty, was neat and clean.

"I've been there myself," said her benefactor, looking down into Miriam's face. "I'm not an angel, and it's been a long time since I was, but never mind that. I have a home here, and they know that Mag Mellicent is better than she looks, they do."

By degrees Miriam's heart warmed to the woman, and it was not long before they had ex-

changed stories, Miriam telling her new-found friend all she thought she ought to know.

"You can have a home here, and I don't think they will ever find you in this house," said Mag. "I've been living here these ten years, and no one has ever had curiosity enough to look beyond my threshold."

A hiding-place at last! Miriam's fears fled, and the longer she remained in the house near the river, the easier she felt as regards the shadow of the dark hand.

At last she asked Mag if she would go and look for Gideon Grip, telling her to climb up the stairway leading to the detective's den and if she found him in to tell him that she (Miriam) was safe and where she was.

Mag agreed and armed with a note which Miriam hastily scrawled set out on her mission.

"She's a queer one," said the woman to herself when she found a square between her and Miriam. "I pick her up on the street and take her home and she tells me a strange story about being hunted by a terrible enemy. It may be, for she had a frightened face when I found her and the color hasn't come back yet."

Mag Mellicent went to the stairway where she expected to find the Secret Shadower, but the moment she entered the hall leading to it she fell back, for a man was coming down.

"Mebbe it's him—the man I want to see," said Mag. "I've never seen him and if I find him here, so much the better."

She stood aside and waited for the man to come down.

"Are you Gideon Grip?" said Mag, taking from her bosom at the same time, the letter she had brought from Miriam.

The man stopped and transfixed her with his cold gray eyes.

"I am Gideon Grip," he said. "What is it, woman?"

"I come from Miriam and she sent you this," and Mag handed him the letter which he took with unfeigned glee.

"She's with you, eh? Well, that's good."

"Yes, sir, I picked her up on the street this morning when she was flying from a foe and took her home where she's safe from the hunter. I like Miriam already and she can have a home with me as long as she cares to stay."

"Where are you?"

Mag gave her number while the gloved hands which she watched opened Miriam's note and the eyes wandered to it eagerly.

"I sha'n't forget it," he said.

"But what news have you for her?" asked Mag. "She wants to know how you got along and—"

"She does, eh? That's natural. Tell her that I got along first-rate, that everything is moving smoothly and, above all things, keep her with you if you can."

"I'll do that, sir, for I want her to escape from the enemy and will do all in my power to shield her."

Miriam's friend turned back and the man in gloves accompanied her to the door.

"You're going back to Miriam now, are you?" he asked.

"I am. She will want to know how I got along and is anxious to hear from you."

A smile appeared at the lips of the man and in another moment Mag was going back.

She was in no haste to get back to the woman she had left in her little house, and instead of moving along in that direction she took another and turned up after awhile in a distant part of the city where she proceeded to drink some wine in a stall all to herself.

Two hours had passed when she ran up the steps to the room where she had left Miriam.

Opening the door she went in and stopped in the middle of the floor with a strange cry.

Miriam was there, but did not appear to notice her.

She lay back in the only rocker in the room with her hands clinched and her eyes fixed on the door with the stare of a maniac.

"In God's name, what does this mean?" cried Mag, springing forward and clutching Miriam's shoulder. "Who's been here while I was away?"

There was no reply and the stare of the woman in the chair seemed to grow more intense.

"What! you're not dead, are you, Miriam? You look like a dead person, yet you breathe, which is proof that you're still on this side of the grave and—"

Mag fell back looking into the white face of the woman she had left alone, and at last went out.

Not far from where she lived was a doctor whom she found in his office and with him at her heels she returned to the room.

"That's her—that's Miriam Marx," she cried, pointing at Miriam still in the chair. "If she ain't dead she's shamming and—"

She stopped as the doctor bent over Miriam and felt her pulse.

"What is it, doctor?"

The man of medicine shook his head.

"It's something uncommon," he said at last, and then he began to ply Miriam with restoratives which did not seem to have the desired effect.

"This woman must go to the hospital."

"I'll keep her where she is," interposed Mag. "I found her on the street and she shall be my charge—"

"But she can't stay here. It is one of the strangest cases I ever met with and—"

"What is it—a faint?"

"It's more than that. She has been drugged."

"Miriam drugged?" cried Mag. "It's impossible. She was here alone and wide awake when I left. I told her to keep the door locked and she had seen enough within the last twenty-four hours to obey. I don't think she's been drugged, and, then—"

"Madame, this is no place for this woman. She must go to the hospital."

Finding that she could not have her way in the matter, Mag Mellicent gave in and in a little while Miriam, still in the strange state, was carried down stairs and put into a wagon.

"I won't get to report her to-day," said Mag, watching the vehicle as it moved off. "I won't get to tell her that I delivered her note to the detective; but I can tell him what happened to her. I wonder if I would find him in the den now?"

Once more Mag hastened back over the streets she had lately traversed and ran up the stairs leading to Gideon Grip's office.

She opened the door at once when a "Come in" answered her rap, but started back from the man into whose face she looked.

It was not the same one she had met on the stairs.

"I want to see Gideon Grip, but you are not—"

"I am Gideon Grip," was the interruption.

"I was here awhile ago and gave a man on the stairs a note from Miriam Marx. He said he was Gideon Grip."

"He did, eh? And you gave him a note intended for me, did you?"

The truth seemed to flash through the woman's mind and the following moment she had dropped, white-faced, into a chair.

"I see what I did! I delivered it to the wrong man and he must have beaten me home."

Then she told the detective everything and Gideon with a smile said:

"It's very plain. You gave the note to Paradox—the Man with the Valise."

"God help me!" cried Mag. "I have been the death of Miriam Marx, the woman I would have saved!"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE HAND OF PARADOX.

THE House of the Grinning God stood dark and silent.

Nothing from the outside told that it was inhabited, but beyond the closed blinds, within the walls of mystery, there was a light and a human figure.

The form of Sakkar, the old man, filled a chair at a small bench over which were scattered a number of objects which told that he was at work.

A light from overhead fell upon him and revealed him besides throwing a half shadow on the nearest wall.

The old man was alone and his dark skin shone in the light.

His hands were busy and moved from side to side as he wrapped about a curious looking dagger a dark thread which now and then glistened as if it had a silver strand in its woof.

All at once he turned round and looked toward the door which had swung open on its oiled hinges.

Seeing the person who had come in, old Sakkar looked at him with a strange half smile at his darkish lips and watched him as he came forward and stood beside him.

The figure of the new-comer stood above the old man and a pair of shining eyes looked down upon him.

Paradox had come.

The handsome man in gloves watched Sakkar for some time without moving and the old Hindoo's hands went back to his work.

"When you are through I want to talk to you," said Paradox.

In another moment the old man had laid aside the dagger and was at the strange man's service.

"Well, we have lost our priestess," said Paradox.

The eyes into which he was looking seemed to lose their brilliant twinkle.

"Lost Iris the Child of Vishkar?" he cried. "Impossible! She is in the coils so long as she has a drop of the drug, and she has enough to last her a lifetime."

"If she isn't robbed?"

Old Sakkar started and almost fell from his seat.

"If she isn't robbed?" he gasped. "Do you mean to tell me that—"

"Iris has been robbed."

It seemed as if all the spirit fled from the soul of the old wretch and his hands shook.

"There is nothing like it in this country and she had every particle of it," he said.

"I know that, and if she has no more she will pass beyond the spell unless—"

"Unless we can weave another around her, eh?"

"That is it."

Sakkar the tawny villain shook his head.

"You mean that you can weave no other net about the girl?" said Paradox.

"I am powerless. I did not make the drug; it came from the secret work-shops of the Indian wise men—those who wrote the books we lost years ago at the hands of the American who has felt the hand of Vishkar," and he glanced at the gloved hands that hung at his visitor's side.

"That is all very nice," said Paradox, "but you are not a child in mystery. You were educated among the secret-makers of the East—you know how they kill and draw people into the toils."

"You are up in mystery, too," cried Sakkar with a grin. "You can throw people into a trance that imitates death and while they are there make them discover hidden secrets for you—to track people all over a great city. And yet you come to me for help!"

"But I hold nothing in my hand like the drug which transformed Iris into the priestess of Vishkar and kept her in our power," was the reply.

"Who robbed her?" asked the old man.

"Who but the infernal detective?"

"Why don't you despoil him?"

"I can't. He destroyed the drug."

"How?"

"He threw the bottle against the wall of Iris's chamber and it was broken."

Old Sakkar seemed to take a long breath.

"Did you see him do it?"

"No, but I saw the stain on the wall, and Iris told me enough to let me know what had been done."

"This man is dangerous. He got out of your trap, and since then I haven't slept very well."

"Do you fear him, you who know how to kill and not touch a man?"

"It is not the fear of the detective, for we are taught to fear no living creature," was the reply. "It is not that, I say. But, you see we don't like to have shadows on our track. And this man who robbed Iris is still at large?"

"Yes, curse him," grated the Man with the Valise.

Once more old Sakkar glanced at the speaker's hand.

"You want me to touch him, don't you?" grinned Paradox. "I intend to do that, but, first, I want Iris back in the power of the Hand—I want something that will act like the drug she has lost, and bring her to this house, and back to her role as the priestess of Vishkar."

The head of Sakkar moved slowly, all the while watched by the man at his side.

"Is it impossible, with all your learning?" he asked.

"She had all there existed of the drug in America."

"You gave it to me for her. Didn't you save none of it, not one drop for an emergency?"

"Not one drop."

Paradox drew back and eyed old Sakkar with the eyes of a lynx.

The hands at his side opened and shut as if eager to go to work, and the one with the maimed thumb was several times lifted as if about to dart, serpent-like, at the old man at the bench.

"Then, I will have to do what I can," he said, at last. "The goddess has lost a priestess, and we may fail, all because the ferret broke the vial and spilled the drug."

There was no answer.

"You rascally old devil, I believe you know more than you will tell. You have lied before and why won't you lie again? You sprung from a race of deceivers, and you stand ready to do the bidding of the dark circle to which you belong."

Paradox was looking at Sakkar with the blazing eye of a fiend, and when he reached the door he raised his hand and shook it at the man at the work-bench.

The moment the door closed on him Sakkar looked round, and seeing that his visitor was gone, slipped from the stool and crossed the room.

His wrinkled fingers touched a button in the wall, and thrusting his hand into the niche thus brought to light, he drew forth something wrapped in dark silk.

This object he swiftly hid in his bosom, and then went back to the work-bench.

Meantime Paradox had climbed the stair, and from the steps was watching Sakkar.

He had seen the visit to the hole in the wall, and when the old Indian returned to the bench he grinned and then went on up the flight.

In a room above he stopped and opened the drawer of a small stand.

Slipping from it half a dozen masks, one of which he selected, he restored the rest to the drawer and went out.

But he did not go back down the same steps. An hour passed and then old Sakkar, having finished wrapping the dagger with the dark thread, arose and crept from the work-shop.

His eyes had a strange gleam, and it was evident that he intended to quit the house.

He no longer seemed old, for his limbs were agile, and his eye filled with fire.

He went out with a shadow at his heels, and the man who dogged his footsteps kept him in sight every minute.

"He lied to me," said Paradox. "The old fox is trying to cut loose from me, and ever since he tried to steal the pages I cut out of the old book of secrets. He is going toward Iris's house, and he carries something in his bosom. I can see by the way he places his hand there every now and then that he is taking something precious to the girl. What is it?—more of the drug? The truth isn't in old Sakkar, and the time is near at hand when I will cut loose from him and finish the game to suit myself."

Paradox shadowed Sakkar to the vicinity of Iris Norman's home where the old Indian became as cautious as a fox, and when the shadow saw him glide round to the side entrance, he stood aloof, knowing that he (Paradox) could enter the house without the old man's knowledge.

Sakkar vanished, and the next moment Paradox did the same.

"When you beat me you beat a fox," said the Man with the Valise. "I haven't been under your instruction all this time for nothing, and I know how to play a hand as shrewd as any you hold."

Paradox stood inside the house seeing here and there a ray of light, but nothing of the man he had tracked to the place.

He entered the laboratory and stood among its shadows for some time, waiting for developments.

All at once he heard a footstep that came down the same stair which he had used in getting into the chamber.

In another moment Paradox had ensconced himself behind a curtain, and was ready to see and hear anything that should present itself.

The door opened, and he saw a figure glide in to the place.

"It is the maid—Zuleika, the holder of the secret," said he, seeing the person who had come in. "If she were out of the way there would be one stumbling-block less. Trust a woman with a secret and see it revealed just when silence is most needed!"

Zuleika advanced to Dorsey Drake's table and turned on the gas above it.

"I wonder what effect this will have on me?" she was heard to say. "It was by an accident that I discovered it in the hall. It must have been dropped by Iris for it is the same sort of bottle I've seen her have in the secret room of the tiger rugs and from which she has drank to turn the color of an Asiatic and then glide from the house to the place on St. L—street."

Zuleika as she spoke took from her bosom a small bottle which she held up in the light and gazed at some time without speaking further.

The eyes of the man behind the curtain snapped like diamonds.

"In heaven's name, where did that girl get the drug?" he exclaimed. "It is the same as that which used to transform Iris into the priestess of Vishkar, but the ferret broke the other vial on the wall."

Zuleika heard nothing and saw nothing but the vial clutched in her hands.

"Why not try it?" she murmured. "I don't know exactly how much she took, but the effect was magical—I know that."

She opened the vial and moved it toward her lips.

Paradox glided from his covert and slipped across the soft carpet. With one hand put forward he approached Zuleika, his eyes seeing nothing but the bottle near her lips.

All at once the girl threw back her head and glued the vial to her mouth.

"Here, I want that!" cried Paradox.

Zuleika started back with a sudden cry.

At the same time his hand closed on her wrist and held her as in a grip of iron.

The next moment the bottle, falling from the unmoistened lips of the frightened creature, struck the table whose top was marble and to the man's horror broke and stained the whiteness of the slab!

"Do you know what you've done?" he cried, his hand sinking to the very bones of the girl's arm. "You have robbed Iris of her life-giving drug. Where did you find it?"

"In the hall near her door," stammered Zuleika.

"When?"

"Not ten minutes ago. Iris must have dropped it there and I thought I would—"

"The devil you did!" broke in the Man with the Maimed Thumb. "Your devilish curiosity has sealed your doom. You are going to die here, Zuleika."

She uttered a shriek that rung through the whole house. At the same time she jerked back, overturned the table which crashed to the floor, and breaking his hold on her, sprung across the room and was gone.

Paradox stood in the chamber alone, biting his lips through and cursing his fatal luck. He had lost again!

CHAPTER XXIII.

GIDEON GRIP'S TRAP.

GIDEON GRIP, the man of many trails, pitied the anguish of the woman who believed that one act of hers had wrecked the life of Miriam Marx.

When she became calm he saw her quit his den and vanish.

"Miriam was visited by the old enemy—by the Man with the Maimed Thumb," said the ferret to himself when he was alone in the little room. "When she recovers from the effects of that visit she will be able to give me a clew," and he went to the hospital to which the unfortunate mother of Iris had been conveyed.

But she was as far from telling anything as ever, and when he looked down into the white face that burrowed in the pillow he turned away and was met by one of the surgeons in charge.

"There is no hope for her unless the hand that threw her into this state comes to bring her out of it," he said to Gideon.

"What is it?"

"The working of some drug," was the reply. "It baffles our skill completely."

Once more the detective looked at the patient and grated his teeth.

He went back—back to the trail with new resolution tugging at his heart.

"I shall now run down without mercy this Man with the Maimed Thumb," he said.

He knew the task that confronted him and did not underrate it.

Having broken the bottle from which Iris had drawn the double existence which she had been living, he saw that the girl was still in the grip of the Black Hand, though not so much so as she had been, for if it was true that he had destroyed all of the drug, she could not be thrown back into the second state and be again the priestess of Vishkar and the victim of the wiles of the old man who inhabited the House of the Grinning God.

But at the same time there was on his trail a man who had sworn to baffle him at every point.

Paradox, fresh from his failure to snatch from Zuleika the vial which he believed contained some of the same powerful drug which she had been using, stood on the street with eagerness heating his blood.

He had seen old Sakkar come from the girl's home, creeping away in the shadows and returning to the House of the Grinning God and had watched him to the very steps of the mysterious abode.

"In that old wretch lies all that is cunning and deadly," said Paradox. "When I united my fortunes with his it was agreed that I should have my way in everything, and I was to give him the benefit of what I could do, and he was to let me have the benefit of his knowledge of the dark and mysterious. It was a compact, but he has lied to me—he has said that the vial which Iris has been guarding and the one broken by Gideon Grip, contained all there was of the drug in America, yet he enters her house with more, and, like a fool, loses it for Zuleika to find and break with my hand on her arm. There may be more of it yet. I can't believe the old sinner at all. He lies like his tribe. I am going to know the truth now; I intend to force from him the whole truth without equivocation or—"

The sentence was not finished for Paradox clinched his hands and moved away.

If he had looked back he would have seen that a man was watching him from the corners of a pair of keen eyes.

Already the man of trails was on his track and Gideon Grip, the prince of ferrets, was watching him with the eagerness of a leopard.

Paradox walked on until he reached the front door of a little house which he opened without the ceremony of a knock and disappeared inside.

It was one of his numerous retreats and there he was not known as Paradox, but by another name which gave the inmates of the little house no clew to his true nature.

He shut the door of a chamber behind him and took a chair.

Keeping on the gloves which he nearly always wore, he lighted a cigar and then rung a bell.

In a moment the head of a woman appeared at the door and seeing him in the room she came forward and stood near the table.

Paradox looked at her a moment and then signed her to be seated.

"You told me the other day that you didn't believe in mesmerism, I believe?" he said, looking at her with his gray eyes.

"I really don't remember what I did tell you," said the woman, somewhat confused.

"Let me see what you do believe in," and Paradox leaned forward, at the same time making a pass before her face with the fatal hand.

In a few seconds the woman in the chair was his prey and with the grin of an arch fiend, the Man with the Maimed Hand bent forward and for a moment eyed her in silence.

"With me all victims are the same, though some are better trackers than others," he remarked, at the same time touching slightly the left hand of the woman.

"What do you see, Nora?" he asked.

The breast heaved and the head seemed to turn away as if trying to break the spell of the mesmerist.

"Look and tell me what you see," continued Paradox. "What has become of the man with the soft step and the dark eye?"

"I see him," said the woman, her lips barely parting to let out the words. "I see him, now that you have told me to look."

"Ha, I thought you would see him by and by," smiled Paradox. "What is he doing?"

"He is bending over a cot in a hospital ward."

"Who is on that cot? Look sharp, Nora."

"A woman is there. I can see her now. She looks almost like one dead."

"Isn't she dead? Make sure of what you see."

"No! she is not dead. She breathes and the doctors shake their heads when they talk about her to the man who looks on."

"Do they tell him that she will die?"

"They say that they never saw a case like hers—that she is under the influence of some powerful drug which baffles them and that she will never again be her old self."

"Then, they don't tell him that she will die?"

"I don't hear them say that."

"Where is the man now?"

"He is out on the street."

"Follow him. I won't let them track you and you are safe while I am about."

The mesmerist's victim drew a long breath of relief and went on:

"I have followed him to a room near the river. I see him there with the woman who was to see him some time ago. I can't hear what they say."

"Watch till he comes out of the house."

"He is out now."

"Once more on the street?"

"Yes."

"Don't lose him."

Paradox waited a minute before he spoke again.

"I have found him again," said the lips of the woman in his power.

"What is he doing now?"

"He is alone in a chamber that looks like a woman's room. It isn't the room where he met the woman who called herself Mag."

"Describe the place."

"The room is small and has a window that looks down into an alley. It is almost bare of furniture, and he has pulled up to the table the only chair in the place."

"And is writing there?"

"Yes."

"Go and look over his shoulder. Tell me what he is writing, Nora."

"He is writing something that puzzles me—he is putting down some strange characters, and I see now a bit of dark parchment like paper at his side. He looks at it and then goes to the other paper, as if he were trying to decipher the scrawl on the yellowish paper."

The face of Paradox was now tensely drawn.

He had lost color, but his eyes had an unnatural flash, and he was watching the woman in his power as if he would like to have touched her, unresisting as she was, with the deadly hand.

"Is he working yet?" he asked, at last.

"Yes. He is working at the puzzle, as before."

Paradox rose and took the woman by the hand. Leading her from the room, he came back in a moment alone and extinguished the light.

"What will she believe when she comes out of the spell?" he said, with a smile.

The next moment he glided from the room, crept down the stairs with the noiseless tread of a panther, and went out into the night.

Twenty minutes later, crouching in the same alley by which Miriam Marx's visitor had come to her watching with sleepless eyes for the dreaded hunter on her track, he looked up and saw a light in the same little room.

Making his way to the sloping roof with the nimbleness of a cat, he crept along it until he reached the sill where he clung and managed to look into the room.

He saw seated at the table, and using the one chair of the place, a man of the sort described by Nora, his victim.

"Here yet—the very man I want!" he said. "The girl did not track him for nothing. She never missed him, but kept him in sight among the shadows, and I am face to face with the cool ferret—the man who is the sworn enemy of the Hand."

If Gideon Grip had looked toward the window at that moment, he might have seen the face grinning there with all the demonism of a handsome fiend's, but as he kept to his work, he saw nothing.

Paul Paradox drew back from the window, crept back over the roof and vanished.

He now glided to the front door of the house and found it unlocked, like the doors of thousands of apartment-houses of a great city.

The Man with the Maimed Thumb had come to that door for mischief.

Slipping into the room he looked up the stairs and saw no one to block his way.

Now he drew from an inner pocket a little porcelain box long and flat, with the head of a grinning serpent for its lid.

Touching a spring he opened the box and sprinkled over his glove a whitish powder, which vanished as it touched the kid, as snow vanishes in the sun.

Having done this, he replaced the box and crept up the steps.

In the corridor above the man found himself among some shadows, through which he could barely make out a door which seemed to lead him to the room whose light he had seen from the alley.

He advanced toward it and listened there.

A light burned in the room beyond. He investigated and discovered that the door was not locked, and that the slightest push would open it.

He waited there a few moments, and then opened the portal.

Of course the man he had seen writing at the table was still at work.

What was his astonishment, when, looking into the room, he discovered the room to be untenanted!

The sight sent a thrill over his frame.

Gone?

The detective upon whom he had crept like the fox out of his way?

It seemed incredible.

The Man with the Maimed Thumb looked awhile, with his teeth in his lip.

"Curse him, he went out by the window," he said, seeing that the sash was up. "He heard me despite my cleverness, and is out of my way. He went so hurriedly as to forget his work. I will see what he was at."

He entered the room and advanced toward the table.

The parchment-like paper, which Nora had described, lay on the table and under the light, and he was about to pick it up when something clicked on his ear.

"A trap's a trap, no matter who sets it!" said a stern voice, and he found himself looking into the muzzle of a revolver held by the steady hand of Gideon Grip.

Paradox, flushed to crimson by the suddenness of the attack, recoiled and looked at his enemy.

His hands fell back from the paper, and he glared at the cool man of trails, whose pistol covered his head with the certainty of doom.

"One step—one movement—and I will end your life where you are," came over the revolver. "I don't know but that I should do it anyhow. You are Paradox, the Man with the Maimed Thumb; you are the co-plotter of the old devil of the House of the Grinning God."

"By Jove!" laughed Paradox, "that's complimentary!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

HUNTED AND HUNTER.

FOR the first time in their lives the two men stood face to face.

Nothing separated them, not even the table at which the detective had studied the puzzle of the leaves from the old book.

Paradox stood erect with his cool eye riveted upon the man who had promised Iris that he would hunt down the hand which had left its mark on the face of Dorsey Drake.

He looked across the space that separated them and into the eyes of Gideon Grip, the man of trails.

They had met at last!

"Sit down!" said the detective.

The tall figure of the handsome man in gloves did not stir.

"Sit down! I will stand," continued Gideon, and the revolver seemed to creep lower and was as firmly gripped as ever.

Paradox moved to the chair and took it; at the same time sending toward the man who faced him a look which would have killed if it had been a bullet.

In the chair, he laid one of the gloved hands on the table, but not the one with the mutilated thumb and said by his glare:

"I am ready for you; go on."

Gideon Grip took one step forward and kept the revolver in front of the face above the table.

"I have at last found you, Paul Paradox, tracker of women and slayer of men," he said.

"Just as you like; you see I am at your mercy," was the reply.

"You have been tracked step by step for days. I have devoted all my time to you. I felt in the dark the hand you are hiding there."

There was no reply.

"Don't you recollect how you touched my throat the night I fell into old Sakkar's trap?"

"I recall nothing," sullenly said the man in the chair.

Gideon Grip saw how cool was the lion he had trapped.

He knew that he was face to face with the coolest of his kind, that the handsome face of Paradox was sphinx-like, and his cleverness without a parallel.

"You killed Dorsey Drake."

"Fool! that man died by his own hand; the doctors said so."

"You came out of the house at eleven that night."

"Who saw me?"

"Miriam Marx."

"Will she say so now?"

These words were spoken with a grin of triumph.

"Answer me," continued Paradox. "If she will tell you so to-night you might have a case against me."

Gideon Grip saw what he was driving at. He knew that Miriam Marx could not tell anything, that she lay at the hospital under the influence of a drug that baffled the doctors, and that the chances were that a rational word would never again pass her lips.

"Miriam Marx saw you emerge from that house. Not only that, but your secret belongs to another woman."

Paradox started.

Had this cool detective seen Zuleika, and had the girl told him what she knew?

"Why didn't I finish her when I had the chance?" he said under his breath.

Then he looked at the ferret and laughed.

"You have looked nowhere else but up and down the trails I have made," he said. "You are one of these bloodhounds with a single idea. I suppose I could not convince you that I am not the person who helped Dorsey Drake across the river."

"I have picked up link after link of the chain," was the reply.

"You have, eh? You are very clever, but you may have forged a chain of falsehoods."

"I have discovered your connection with the Black Hand. I know that a hand was seen on the face of Drake, seen by Iris; that it reappeared on the skin of Captain Derrick, the man who heard at his heels at all hours the steps of the tracker. I saw it there myself when he lay dead in his last retreat. You also left the print of your hand on the wall along the stairway leading to Derrick's den. That hand was always without the thumb. It was the right hand."

At that moment the right hand of Paradox came into view, and the detective transferred his gaze to it.

"Do you think so?" queried the handsome mystery. "Are you sure you saw the print of my right hand where you say it was to be seen? Let us see."

He tugged at the glove for a moment and then threw it upon the table.

At the same time he held up the hand thus exposed and despite his coolness, a cry almost fell from the ferret's lips.

The thumb was there; not the slightest part of it was missing!

Gideon Grip looked not at the man who confronted him, but at the hand held up in the light.

It seemed to give the lie to all his work; it seemed to clear the man he had tracked so long and with such pertinacity.

Paradox continued to exhibit the hand, holding it fairly in the light and looking over it at the man who was nonplused as never before.

"Are you sure you saw the print of this hand on the face of the dead and on the wall? Are you sure you felt it yourself in what you call the House of the Grinning God? Beware, Gideon Grip! A man may be too sure and be deceived."

There was no reply and resting the suspected hand on the table, Paradox continued to eye the man who had caught him in a trap.

At last he pushed back the chair and made a motion which the detective quickly caught.

"Not yet!" said Gideon Grip.

"What else do you want to say?"

"I am not through with you yet."

"Oho, go on, then."

"You have a connection with the old Indian who inhabits the house on St. L—street. Do you deny that?"

"Can you prove that as well as you can the accusation that I carry a maimed hand?" grinned Paradox.

"I have tracked you to the old house."

"Does that make Sakkar's companion? Don't you know that even in this city, American as it is, there are people who worship the gods of the East Indies?"

Gideon Grip knew that.

"Because I may have crossed the threshold of the old Indian's house, must I become his tool?"

"You have been to India."

Paradox smiled.

"Who told you this? Who told you that I have seen the temples and snake-charmers of the East?"

"Never mind. You have seen them, all the same, and your name is written in a book which you know is in the keeping of the girl who still inhabits the house on the avenue."

"In the hands of Iris, do you mean?" cried the man in gloves. "You don't connect that fair creature with the trail you have been following according to your story?"

"Why not? When she has been in the clutches of the terrible drug which changes not only the hue of the skin but the very nature of its victims, why shouldn't I connect her with

this mystery, which to-day baffles the doctors of Gotham?"

"You may go too far with this."

Gideon Grip looked, but said nothing.

"You hear me," cried Paradox, stretching forth his hand and covering the man of trails. "You may go too far, I say. If you are so very eager to solve the mystery of the death of Dorsey Drake, nabob and beggar, why don't you confine your hunt to the house under whose roof he died?"

There was in the eyes of the speaker a gleam which the ferret could not understand.

The next moment Paradox had risen despite the gripped revolver and with the coolness of a desperado who has counted everything was putting on his glove.

"The next time be sure you have the right man," he was saying, glancing up at Gideon Grip. "Don't see a maimed thumb where there is none, and don't track any longer a man who can throw across your path a horror from which even you, cool as you are, would recoil with a cry."

He fell back from the table as if nothing was in the hand of the detective. He sent a last look across the room and into Gideon's face, seeing there wonderment at the coolness he was displaying.

"You are not going to stop here, I presume," he went on.

"This is not the end of the trail and I never stop this side of that."

"By Jove! I admire your cleverness in that. It takes perseverance to make a good detective, but sometimes the best of you blunder."

"There will be no blunder in the end."

"I hope not. I wouldn't have you lose a chance to rise in the estimation of the Inspector—not for the world, Gideon Grip. But you may look in the wrong direction for the hand that helped Dorsey Drake out of the world, admitting, contrary to the doctors' report, that he was murdered. It is a long lane that turns not to the man who perseveres. I wish you success; I do, indeed. You are cool and cunning, but by Jove! you don't want to track the wrong man."

All the time he was speaking he was slipping inch by inch, and imperceptibly over the floor, and before Gideon knew it, his hand was at the door and it was open.

"I bid you good-night," he said. "What, you don't want to detain me, do you?"

Gideon had taken a step toward him and was about to throw up the revolver when the hand of Paradox shot out and covered him.

"All jokes aside, man, you don't want to track me," he said. "I have submitted to this interview, not because you had the advantage in the start, but from a desire to tell you that you may be looking up the wrong clew."

"The wrong clew?" echoed Gideon Grip, a smile wreathing his face.

"You heard me. Why don't you go back and begin over? Don't you know that when some men of your sort get started wrong they always stay wrong?"

There was no answer.

"You must know, too, as well as I do, that you have no proof against me—that you would be laughed at in court, that the very hand you have suspicioned shown there, would toss your accusation to the winds and strand you on the shores of defeat."

The door opened and the figure of the man he had tracked so long crossed the threshold and vanished.

In an instant the detective sprang to the door and threw it open.

He leaned over the step and looked down the stairs.

At the foot of the flight stood the man who had escaped from his trap, and he saw a pair of triumphant eyes regarding him while he looked.

"When you get Miriam Marx to tell her story you will do justice a favor," came up the steps.

"I think we understand one another now. If I am hunted any longer I will show you a trick you have never dreamed of, and if you keep on the trail you will wreck the life and blight the fortunes of the lovely being whose ferret you are by oath. Good-by, Gideon Grip!"

CHAPTER XXV.

THE HIDDEN DETECTIVE.

FOR some moments after Paradox's departure, Gideon Grip stood in the middle of the room and seemed in a deep study.

He realized that the cool head had beaten him and that he had let slip through his fingers the very man for whom he had set a trap. Not only this, but he had looked at the hand he believed to be maimed, and had seen that the thumb was all there.

What was the mystery about that hand?

Ten minutes passed before the ferret of the city recovered from the interview, and even then he left the room in a half-dazed condition.

Miriam was at the hospital and could tell him nothing, or, at least, he had left her in that way, and there seemed nothing to do but to go back to the old trail, or give it up.

The latter resort was not to be thought of, for

he had promised Iris to discover the hand whose mark she had seen on the dead face of Dorsey Drake, and he would not stop short of that consummation.

He wondered how the beautiful girl had fared since the loss of the drug which he had snatched from her.

He was tempted to go back to the house on the avenue and see for himself. Besides, he wanted an interview with Iris, and he was desirous of watching Zuleika under the roof that sheltered her.

An hour after the scene in Miriam's old hiding place the detective stood in Iris's house and no one seemed to be the wiser for his coming.

Thanks to the opportunities afforded by the girl, he was enabled to enter the place unseen, and now he stood in the laboratory, and was looking through it in hopes of finding something which hitherto had escaped his vigilant eyes.

How often had he gone to that house only to see the mystery grow deeper and deeper, until now he was as far from the solution of it as ever.

To him the home of the girl, Iris, was as mysterious as the House of the Grinning God, though it was not the abode of a man like Sakkar, nor the hiding-place of a person of Paradox's sort.

What did Paradox mean when he said that if the ferret stuck to the trail, he would doom Iris to a terrible fate? What was concealed in those words?

Did he mean that the Black Hand would turn against her, and make its dreaded mark on her fair skin—that it would finish her career as it had the careers of others?

For some time the figure of the detective moved about in the room to which he had crept unobserved, and when he heard a door open and saw a form glide in, he drew back into the sheltering shadow of a curtain and waited.

This time the intruder was Iris herself—Iris, the beautiful victim of the dark plot.

From his place of concealment the ferret watched the young girl, and saw her slip to the place where the sacred books were hidden and touch the button which opened the little door in the wall.

He leaned forward in his eagerness and saw every movement.

Presently Iris turned to the table and took her guardian's chair.

He saw how pale she was, and noticed that her lips were welded as if with determination, and while he eyed her, her hand was pressed to her forehead and she sighed.

"It has been coming back to me by degrees," said Iris aloud. "I see the events of that night as though they were more than a dream. Ever since the vial was taken from me by the detective, I have been living another life. There seems new blood in my veins, but oh, the torture I endure! I see everything now as it happened that night. In God's name, why did I come to him and demand to know the truth which I half guessed? What accursed hand led me to this room, where he was trying to discover the elixir of life, but instead found the poison of death?"

She stopped and leaned over the table, her hands turning the leaves of the book she had taken from the niche in the wall, and her eyes seeming to start from her head.

"Why hunt for the secret here? He never found it, though he was learned in strange characters, while I know nothing about them. But I came here and surprised him. I remember it all now. The drug clouded my brain and made me forget. Was that its mission? Did he give it to me for that purpose?"

She rose and carried the book back to the hole in the wall.

"I wonder if there is another drug here as potent as the one Gideon Grip took from me," she went on. "I would find it and take all, that I might forget again."

The hidden detective saw her hunt among the shelves of bottles for something which her eager hands could not find.

He watched her every movement expecting her to suddenly discover something which, in hopes of its being the object she sought, she might put to her lips before he could prevent and drop dead in his presence.

"I can't find it. They must have told the truth when they said I carried all of it in the little box. How foolish I was to keep it on my dresser, but who thought the detective would ever discover the way to the chamber?" Who told him? Zuleika?

Iris turned toward the door as if she would find Zuleika, the maid, and extort a confession from her, but all at once she came back as if she would search the room once more before quitting it.

"He was sitting yonder—in his chair and his back was turned to me when I came in," she went on, looking at the empty chair at the table. "He did not hear me and my voice told him where I was. I see him now as he looked when he discovered that I had entered the room disturbing him, and when he sprang up and seized my arm, telling me that I had no right to invade this room without permission, his eyes seemed to burn and his whole frame shook."

Iris was silent for a moment and again passed her hand over her forehead.

"Why recall that horrid night?" she cried. "Why tell these walls what they already know?"

She began to walk the room like a caged tigress, her beauty of the strangest kind the detective had ever seen and her hands tightly clinched.

"Did I really do it? Was the dagger I carried to this room—God above only knows why—was that to be stained with the blood of the man who took me from obscurity, perhaps disgrace, and gave me a home, but not his name? I remember how he forced me across the carpet and how his hand seemed to burn its way to my bones. It all comes back since I was robbed of the drug which he gave me. I recall the whole scene. I told him that the time had come for him to tell me who I was, but he laughed and called me a fool for wanting to know. I reached the door, but there I stopped. He would have forced me from this room and I felt my blood heat in my veins."

"Then all became dark or seemed to. I drew from my bosom the dagger; I held it over his head, but he laughed saying that I wouldn't stab any one. I demanded to know the circumstances of my birth; I threatened him with the point of the blade at his heart. I told him that I would know my ancestry or have his life. What happened next? Did the blade fall? Did I drive to his heart the needle point of the green-hilted dagger? My hand was not wound about the turquoise hilt for nothing. I entered this room with a secret before me, and the sight of him suddenly maddened me. I saw nothing but his face, so full of resolution; I knew nothing but the madness that tugged at my heart. My God! the dagger must have fallen. I know that it did fall. I saw him fall back, staggering to his chair, and I, with sudden horror in my soul, fled from the room and hid myself in the Asiatic chamber. I awoke there the next morning. I sent for the detective; but then I was in the grip of the drug he took from me. He came, and I told him about the mark of the hand on Dorsey Drake's face. I saw it there. Whose hand was it? Surely not mine."

Iris ceased, and stood for a moment glaring at the table, and the chair beside it.

"Why not tell him all when he comes?" she went on. "Why not let this man of trails have the true clue to the death of Dorsey Drake? He has been following a false scent long enough. There is nothing in the future for me. Geoffrey knows nothing of all this. My letters have told him of the death of Dorsey Drake; he knows that I am alone in the house, and the time for his return is near at hand. Why not tell the detective all, and face the world as a murderer? I am free at last from the power of the strange drug which Paul Paradox threw into my path. There is in all America not another drop of it. Gideon Grip broke the spell; but I am under a worse one. I am in the grip of the hand of guilt. Merciful God, pity me!"

Iris turned and rushed from the room. She was gone in a moment, and before the ferret could rush from his place of concealment and detain her.

What he had heard and seen horrified him. It seemed a terrible dream, a hideous nightmare, and now he seemed to understand the Maimed Thumb's last words.

"If you keep on the trail you will doom the loveliest of beings to a terrible fate!"

Would he not? Was it his duty now to go on and show Iris up as the murderer of Dorsey Drake? Could he proceed, with that fair girl in the toils, and he in possession of her dread secret?

He stood in the room like a person in a trance of horror.

"My God, is all this true?" he asked himself. "Can she be the criminal? If she really saw a hand on the dead face, whose was it? If she killed Dorsey Drake, there must have been a witness. This room has secret doors and hidden stairways leading to it. Who was in the house that night? Where was the Black Hand then?"

Gideon Grip went toward the door by which Iris had fled from the chamber, but stopped with his hand on the knob.

Should he follow the wretched creature to her room, and confront her with the terrible confession he had overheard?

Perhaps the dagger with the turquoise hilt was concealed in the house—perhaps in her boudoir.

It would be a witness against her.

He stood undecided at the door and felt the moments slip away.

He could have guessed where Iris was, yet he did not quit the room.

All at once he became aware that he was not the only person in the darkened chamber.

Some one else had entered, and turning his head, he caught sight of a figure standing near the shelves.

Had Iris come back?

While the detective looked at the intruder, who did not seem to see him, he stood like a statue by the door, but with his hand no longer on the knob.

"I wonder what she found, if anything?" said

a voice which he recognized. "I wonder if she discovered what she was looking for—a drug like the one she has lately lost?"

The speaker was Zuleika.

Gideon Grip recognized the tall form of the handsome maid, the holder of Paradox's secret, and the next moment he had advanced upon her.

Her back was turned to him and she was looking with her keen eyes along the shelves as if in search of something.

"Zuleika?"

The girl turned with a slight cry and seeing him, fell back only to be caught by his hand and held as in the grip of a steel vise.

Gideon Grip did not relinquish his hold on the wrist he had captured, but led the girl to the table and was in the act of turning on the light when she cried:

"Don't! I know who you are. I can see you well enough. In the name of heaven, what do you want?"

"I want the truth," said Gideon. "I want one of the secrets you carry in your heart."

"How do you know I carry any?"

"Never mind that, girl. You carry them and I know it. You know who entered this room the night of the 10th. You know because you are of the kind who know everything that passes under the roof that shelters them. Who came to this chamber that night?"

He saw Zuleika weld her lips as if in fierce resolution and her eyes looked away for a moment.

"Girl, you sha'n't quit this room with that secret still yours alone," sternly continued the man of many trails. "You know who was here that night. You must tell me!"

"Or what?"

"Or quit this house in the grip of justice!"

Zuleika took a long breath.

"Did you see Iris enter this room that night?"

"I did."

"Any one else?"

"God help me, I saw a man come out."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE GLITTER OF—WHAT?

ZULEIKA was looking into the eyes of the detective while she talked and her words as they were spoken bore the impress of truth.

"You saw a man come out of this room, did you?"

"Yes."

"But you did not see him enter?"

"I did not."

"What time of night was it, Zuleika?"

"Shortly after he had left this room the clock struck eleven."

"You were on the watch, were you?"

A slight flush overspread the tall girl's face.

"Not exactly on the watch, but I had seen Iris quit her room, something unusual with her at that hour, and I wanted to see what was up."

"How long did she remain in this room?"

"Not over ten minutes."

"Did you hear anything while she was here?"

There was no answer.

"You did more than watch Iris that night, girl," said Gideon. "You listened, as well."

"Why should I try to deceive a man like you? You know, anyhow."

"Go on. You listened at the door yonder, or you were on the secret stairs—"

"I was outside where I could hear something of what passed between Iris and her guardian."

"Was it a quarrel?"

"It was something like it. He wanted Iris to quit the room and she begged for a secret which he possessed."

"Where were you when Iris came out?"

"Up in the hall among the shadows. She passed me as she went to her room and could have touched me with ease."

"Was she excited?"

"She was as white as a shroud."

"What was in her hand?"

"I could not see, though it seemed to clutch something which was hidden by the folds of her dress."

The detective was silent for a moment.

"Did Iris remain in her room till morning?" he asked.

"I think she did."

"Then, she knew nothing of the visit to Dorsey Drake of the man you saw come out of this room?"

"I think not. He left the house immediately."

"By the front door?"

"Yes."

"Who was that man, Zuleika?"

The girl fell back the full length of the detective's arm and her face lost every vestige of color.

There was the dread of something in her eyes. A tremor went over her frame, her hands shook and she glanced imploringly toward the curtained shelves on the other side of the room.

"You know who came out of this room after Iris left it," said the ferret, coolly. "That is the secret you don't want to surrender. You fear the man who came out."

There was no reply.

Once more the glance of the terrified girl wandered toward the vials on the dead man's shelves and she shuddered again.

"Let me go. I am feeling faint. There seems to be a horrible odor in this room and I—I—"

"I perceive nothing," broke in the detective. "Zuleika, you must tell what you know to me and perhaps to the courts."

"No, no!"

She tried to break from him, but the hand of Gideon Grip held her fast and she stood at last in his presence with her lips welded and her eyes full of defiance.

"You will not tell me?"

"I dare not. You know not the penalty they visit upon the secret-breaker."

"They, girl?"

"What was I saying? What did I say then? My God, I am going mad. I can't tell you who that man was."

"But you saw him emerge from this chamber after Iris came out?"

"Yes."

"You saw him button his coat to the chin and walk from the house?"

"Who told you he did that?" cried Zuleika.

"Don't you know that there were eyes across the way? Did you never see the woman who watched at the opposite window?"

"I have seen her a thousand times."

"Don't you think she would be on the alert such a night as that?"

"It would suit her to be there, I should think. Then, why don't you go to her for what you want?"

The detective smiled.

"Because you are going to tell me, Zuleika," was the reply.

There was no reply to these words, and the hand of the detective seemed to relax its grip.

"You shall sleep on this, girl," he said, his voice losing some of its sternness. "I won't press this question to-night. Go."

The suddenness of her release startled Zuleika, and for a moment she could not believe that she was free.

Gideon Grip fell back, looking at her and noting how eagerly she turned to the door.

"You are free, I say, free to go your way; but the secret you carry may not be one very long."

Zuleika made no reply, but hurried from the room, and the door shut noiselessly upon her flying figure.

"The solution of the mystery is in the keeping of that creature," said the ferret to himself, alone once more in the shadows of that fatal room. "She knows who came out of this chamber that terrible night; not only this, but she knows whose hand dealt the death-blow."

He quitted the house by the door in the rear, but in a moment he was looking at it from the front.

In a little while a door opened, and a female figure, well muffled, slipped out.

The eyes of the man-ferret got an eager gleam. "So soon? I thought you would come out, but not quite so swiftly," he muttered, at once throwing himself upon the trail of the person who hurried off, taking the middle of the sidewalk and flitting past all whom she met.

Gideon Grip kept at her heels, but with a respectful distance between them, and at last tracked his quarry down by seeing her enter a house which had an unpretentious, non-suspicious look.

"Who is in there, Zuleika?" he asked himself, when he saw the hall-door close on the tall figure of Iris's maid. "Who is there that you must seek this house so soon after our interview? Is there no way of seeing what takes place beyond that door?"

There seemed no way, for the door was locked when he slipped up and tried it, and the house was one without a back building with a sloping roof, and the keen detective was baffled for at least once in his life.

He fell to watching the dwelling, and at last saw a light in one of the upper windows.

This was all he saw through the blinds and for some minutes, completely baffled as far as looking into the house was concerned, he drew off and fell to eying it with the patience of a lynx.

An hour passed and then the tall figure of Zuleika came out to glide back with her cloak drawn closely about her person and her feet as swift as the gazelle's.

"Cool-headed enough now," muttered Gideon. "This girl is cunning enough to baffle a level-headed man of trails, and if I don't take care she will give me a good deal of trouble."

He did not watch Zuleika far, but far enough to see that she was going home, and then he returned to the house from which she emerged.

Suddenly he came face to face with a man who passed him like a shadow, and the next moment he was looking at the figure revealed by the light of the street lamp.

There was something about the form that looked familiar and he turned and followed.

"He came out of that house. That is the person Zuleika visited awhile ago."

The chase was quite a long one, but the ferret with his eager tread and cunning eye kept the

quarry in sight and saw it lose itself beyond the portal of the House of the Grinning God.

Gideon Grip smiled to himself at this strange ending to the trail to which Zuleika had led him, stopped and looked curiously at the house.

He had been across its threshold, but, while anxious to track his prey into the dreaded place, he was not going to risk his head among the tricks of old Sakkar and his companion.

Above the door grinned the carved head of the little deity and the exterior of the old house was of itself dire enough to keep any one without a great deal of courage from venturing across the threshold.

Gideon Grip looked on some time, waiting for some one to come out.

He was hoping that the man whom he had tracked to the house would emerge and give him another trail, but the moments slipped away and the place remained as dark and mysterious as ever.

The clocks in the near vicinity of the House of the Grinning God struck eleven and Gideon, the detective, was about to give up the chase for the night when the door opened without warning.

Secure in the shadow that sheltered him, he stood and waited for developments.

Out of the house slipped a figure that looked all around before it moved off, and when it did so it had the detective in pursuit.

"That is the old wretch—that is Sakkar, the Hindoo," he said. "I will see what takes him into the streets at this hour."

Despite the many years he carried, Sakkar was nimble-footed and sly.

He was clad in a loose-fitting suit of clothes, half-Oriental, and Gideon Grip smiled while he followed him, for the garments rendered it impossible for him to lose his prey.

Old Sakkar led the cunning ferret a goodly chase across the district that lay before them, and at last reached the river, where his gait slackened.

Gideon saw the old fellow approach the pier with one hand concealed in the folds of his garment.

The quick eyes of the Hindoo took in everything about him. He saw the shadows that lay thick on the wharves, and now and then caught sight of the sleepy guardians of the city.

His lithe, pantherish figure crept toward the water's edge. He seemed to creep among the shadows, and for a moment was lost to sight.

When Gideon Grip saw him again he was bending over the very edge of the pier, his body in the shadows, and all at once his hand went up, and the detective saw something glitter for a second as it was thrown into the river.

The next moment the figure of old Sakkar had turned and was creeping back with eyes that gleamed like the eyes of a Thug.

He passed the ferret like a shadow, and Gideon, running to the spot where Sakkar had stood, looked out upon the river and saw—nothing!

CHAPTER XXVII.

OLD SAKKAR'S SECRET.

GIDEON GRIP, standing on the pier with the dark waves of the river dashing at his feet, seemed to be for the moment at the end of his trail.

Water hides a good many things, and that which old Sakkar had thrown to the tide had been swallowed up as though it were a stone.

Not a trace of it had been left behind to give the keen-witted ferret a clue to it.

When Gideon turned back it was to find himself alone on the wharf with the old Hindoo out of sight, and nothing to reward his gaze.

With a last look at the river, he went back and up the street down which a few moments before he had dogged the steps of the old serpent of the East.

Undoubtedly old Sakkar had gone back to the House of the Grinning God to report to the man he had tracked to the place, and Gideon, with these thoughts to keep him company, went back himself.

"As sly as a fox and twice as crafty!" he muttered. "I will have to play a new hand if I want to trap you, Sakkar. The secret of this night is locked in your bosom, and you are not the person to give it up. I tracked Zuleika to the House of the Grinning God, but she has gone home, and you, old Sakkar, by this time are nearly back to the den."

It was true; the old Hindoo was nearly home.

When he entered the house he stopped in the dimly-lighted hallway and inclined his head toward the nearest wall.

How his eyes glistened! How they danced in their sockets as if he had out-tricked some one as indeed he had, for had he not baffled the keenest of the thousand and one ferrets of Gotham?

By and by old Sakkar crept up-stairs and opened a door. Gliding into a small room which was poorly lighted, he walked to a settee whereon he cast himself with a laugh.

"They won't find it, that's certain. I threw it into the river and it went down like a stone."

"Are you sure of that?"

Sakkar turned and looked at the speaker who had come in and was standing near the door

looking at him from a pair of eager, all-seeing eyes.

"You threw it into the river, did you? Are you sure you were not watched?"

"Who would watch me?"

"You seem to forget everything important at times."

There was no answer for a moment.

"Do you mean the man who tracks people? Do you refer to the rat who was in our trap?"

"Of course I do. I mean the man who is known as Gideon Grip, the man who is the sworn champion of the girl's rights—he for whom she sent the morning after Dorsey Drake died."

"Well, he won't get to hunt old Sakkar any longer."

The other one, who was our old acquaintance, Paradox, seemed to lean toward the settee and transfix its occupant with his eyes.

"Are you going away?"

"Why not? Isn't the book-stealer dead? Isn't the man who was his friend in the Land of the Hindoo dead also?"

"Both are dead; I admit that."

"Then, why should Sakkar remain longer in this land?"

"You are going away?"

The black eyes in the old man's head glittered like a snake's.

"I am going back."

There was no reply, only the body of Paradox straightened until it had been drawn erect and his hand, not gloved now, shut half madly.

The searching orbs of Sakkar saw this movement. He saw, too, that the man near the wall was watching him like a hawk.

"You are going to leave me to face this man-hunter alone?" said Paradox in a half whisper.

"The blade is in the river."

"What if it is?"

"It will never reward the eyes of the American bloodhound."

"That's all very well. So much for your cunning."

"The doctors said he died by his own hand—that he took some of the deadly drugs he found out in the secrecy of his house. They agreed on this point."

"And they said, too, that Derrick, the English captain, died of heart failure in his den."

"You are right; they said this."

"But there is the detective!"

Old Sakkar broke into a derisive laugh.

"What is one man?" he cried, looking at the hand that hung along Paradox's side. "What is one man, I say, to you?"

"A good deal, perhaps."

"Are you afraid to meet him alone?"

"I fear no man!"

"I thought so," said the old Hindoo. "You are soon to become the husband of the beautiful priestess of Vishkar; you will soon be the happiest man in America."

"But you refuse to stay to the end of the game. Because you have recovered the lost book of secrets, and helped out of the world the men who robbed you, you are going back to India, leaving me to fight the last of the battle alone."

"Can't you fight it and win?"

Paradox turned his eyes from Sakkar a moment.

"I don't know but I am better off without you," he said at last. "I am quite capable of taking care of this detective. I know how to catch foxes, but that is not it."

He came toward Sakkar, his feet making no noise on the carpet, and when he stopped he could have touched the old Indian.

"If you go you must give me the secret," he said.

Old Sakkar recoiled.

"The secret?" he cried.

"Yes. You understand me. I want the secret—the one of life and death."

The answer was a look, nothing more.

"Look here," continued Paradox. "You know how to make the drug which the ferret took from Iris—you know its secret, yet you have told me that she had all there was of it in this country."

Color seemed to fly from Sakkar's face.

"This is not child's play between us; we are men!"

"You may think I know, but—"

"There! don't profane your religion with a lie," broke in the Man with the Valise. "You took to the house another vial of the same drug; you dropped it in the corridor and Zuleika found it, but I scared it out of her grasp, and it was lost."

Sakkar looked amazed, but guilt was depicted on his face.

"Your silence is confession," Paradox went on. "You shall not go back to India with that secret buried in your breast. I need it. I want it, and I won't be put off."

He drew nearer to the old man. Their eyes seemed to touch.

At length the hand of Sakkar was stretched forth, and Paradox saw the strange rings that encircled the fingers.

"Come, don't put me off. I want the secret."

"What will you do with it?"

"I will use it for my own benefit."

"Upon Iris?"

"Perhaps."

"She is yours now; you have charmed her like the serpent of India charms the bird."

"Never mind that. Give me the secret and you can't quit this country too quick for me."

Sakkar seemed to be fighting a mental battle. He eyed Paradox and once turned his head away.

They were the only occupants of the room. The door by which they had entered the place was closed, and the dim light that prevailed showed the queer furniture in a ghostly manner.

Slowly old Sakkar rose and stood for a moment in the middle of the apartment.

"Are you willing to give up the secret? You have more of the drug. You have had a supply all the time."

He crossed the room with Paradox at his heels and left the chamber.

He led the Man with the Valise to the little work-shop he sometimes occupied and seated himself at the bench.

Paradox bent over him and watched him with eyes that never left him for a second.

Saying nothing, old Sakkar reached up and touched a spring above the bench.

The eager eyes of Paradox saw several greenish bottles in a niche and they lent a new light to his eyes.

"I thought you had a supply of it," he said, looking down at his companion. "What is in the large vial on the right?"

"The one great secret of the Black Hand—the one no man knows but those who are its priests."

"It is death, isn't it?"

"It is more than death," said Sakkar. "Its contents are described in no book, not even on the pages you stole from the volume you brought from Zuleika."

Paradox bit his lips, but said nothing.

"It won't be long," he thought. "I will soon be rid of this old rascal and will put up with his insults until he is out of the way."

"Take the vials; they belong to you," continued Sakkar.

"All of them?"

"Why not? You want a secret; it is there. If I go back to the shrines of Vishkar, what do I want of the drug?"

Paradox leaned over the bench. He was eager to clutch the strange drug which had given Iris Norman a second existence stranger than her natural one. He saw nothing but the vials on the little shelf. Ah, if he had but watched the old Hindoo at that moment!

He touched the first bottle; his fingers were closing on the green vial when the head of a snake darted at his hand from the ceiling of the niche and he felt it touch his skin.

"Villain, wretch, hell-hound!" shrieked Paradox, as he staggered back. "Has it come to this, that you kill the man to whom you owe the finding of the lost books?"

The grinning face of Sakkar was all he saw.

The serpent clinging to his hand writhed and twisted and it seemed to him that he felt in his blood the deadly poison of the cobra.

With all the strength he could summon to his aid he seized the slimy coils of the snake and pulled it from his hand.

He flung it into the hideous face of old Sakkar which had become magnified into one vast grinning visage that seemed to fill half the room, then, with all his strength going out, he fell face foremost on the floor, cursing, with what he thought was his last breath, the man who had wrought his ruin.

For a little while the old Hindoo looked down at the man on the carpet.

Slowly he left his seat and bent over Paradox. He turned him over and smiled. The face of the Man with the Valise was nearly black.

From the folds of his garment Sakkar drew a little box and over the wounded hand sprinkled a grayish powder, then, with a last look which meant farewell, he glided from the room and was gone.

It was the last of the old priest of the goddess Vishkar. His footsteps died away in the distance, and when Paradox came back to life and opened his eyes, something seemed to tell him that he was the sole tenant of the House of the Grinning God.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE TRACK OF A SERPENT.

"SAKKAR can go now!"

Thus spoke the man who crept from the House of the Grinning God, shortly after the events we have just witnessed.

There was nothing to indicate that the speaker was old Sakkar, the cunning priest of the heathen goddess—nothing but his dark skin and sunken eyes.

He looked no longer old.

There was about him the elasticity of youth, and in his step the springiness of the gazelle's.

He dodged into the shadows that awaited him and slipped away.

He carried nothing so far as human eye could see.

If he had upon his person anything of moment it was carefully hidden and nothing was in sight.

For some squares he slipped along keeping in the shadows, though, when it was necessary, he did not shun the light, and when he reached a certain street he dodged into an alley and then disappeared beyond a gate.

Nearly all this time a man was following old Sakkar.

A man who had been watching the House of the Grinning God ever since the old man's return from the river, was at his heels, and when he vanished beyond the gate in the alley, this person drew near and listened.

"If I lose him now the secret may be lost," said this tracker who was Gideon Grip, the ferret. "If I let this old fox get away now he will never adorn my trap."

He was right. Sakkar had turned his face Indiaward.

The cobra was going across the sea to live again among his native jungles.

After awhile Gideon Grip, resolved not to let this man escape him come what might, continued to watch the gate a few minutes when he opened it himself.

He crossed a little back-yard and reached a house which rose tall and dark above him.

He listened against the wall of the basement, but heard nothing. If Sakkar was in the house, he made no noise and needed no light, which went to show that he knew exactly where to go.

At last Gideon, seeing a door in the basement ajar, went down and pushed it open.

He found himself in a room which he measured with his hands and then discovered a stairway.

Had the noiseless feet of Sakkar ascended this flight of steps?

Gideon Grip well realized the danger he was in tracking this dangerous disciple of Vishkar; he had already seen something of his infernal magic and had even felt his deadly hand; but the life, the happiness of Iris was at stake, and he had sworn to let nothing turn him from the trail.

He opened the stair door and went up.

Suddenly he stopped and drew his shoes off.

At the head of the flight he came to a halt and listened. He could make out the outlines of a corridor to his left; but it soon lost itself in the darkness.

Still he had seen nothing of Sakkar.

Going down the corridor, he reached another flight of steps up which he went and found a door.

Perhaps he was on the wrong trail. He could not tell what had become of the old man, but he was following what might be the right track.

All at once the detective stood still, and against the wall of the last corridor he had reached.

He had heard a footstep silken in its nature, but just the kind old Sakkar would make, and holding his breath in the demi-gloom with his hand on the butt of his revolver, he waited for the next move.

Something was coming down the corridor, but whether man or beast Gideon did not know.

Nearer and nearer came the Unknown.

Suddenly he became conscious that he was seen, that a pair of eyes almost within reach of his arms were watching him and that he had been discovered by the very man he had tracked.

If the person ahead was not Sakkar, then it must be Satan.

Several moments passed and then the ferret saw the figure move.

It came toward him, but turned suddenly and backed off.

"You sha'n't escape me that way!" exclaimed Gideon, springing forward. "I am here to close this hunt and you are Sakkar, the very man I want."

The person he followed halted as suddenly as he had fallen back.

In another instant the detective came up and threw out his hand.

It closed on a human arm and he drew its owner toward him.

Not a word had been breathed aloud by either person.

When Gideon found the man a prisoner in his grip he hurried him toward the gas jet that burned blue at the end of the corridor to see whom he had caught.

His heart was beating fast and when he looked into the face of his prize, a cry burst from his throat.

That person Sakkar? Impossible!

He was gazing into a face much younger than the old Hindoo's, a face so unlike the Indian's that he was prompted to release his man and apologize; but something, the glitter of the deep-seated eyes, continued his grip.

"This must be the old demon I am after," thought Gideon. "This is Sakkar, no matter how he looks. I will hold him and see."

Then he said to his prisoner:

"You led me a pretty chase; you are playing a game almost as cunning as the one you played in the House of the Grinning God."

The listener showed a row of yellow teeth, but said nothing.

"You are Sakkar."

Still there was no answer.

"We will go back, Sakkar. I have a place

for you. You were going to give me the final slip. Were you going back to India?"

The look that rewarded the ferret was one of mystery and the eye from which it came a deep, dark puzzle.

Gideon's prisoner made no resistance and was taken down the corridor and thence to the basement.

The silence that reigned throughout the house told the detective that it was uninhabited and he soon became convinced of this fact.

In the basement he stopped and struck a light. The man he had captured looked toward a chair and Gideon told him to be seated.

In the chair he folded his long dark hands and smiled.

"It is Sakkar," said the ferret to himself. "I am in doubt no longer. I have overhauled the runaway."

For a moment the old man sat still without moving a muscle, when all at once he sprang up and bolted for the door. If the detective had not been on the watch he would have escaped, but catching him suddenly midway between him and the door, he gripped him tightly and held him fast.

"You were going back to India, Sakkar?"

Sakkar? Who calls me Sakkar?"

The voice was not that of the old Indian's, but the eyes were his.

"On one condition will I let you have your way."

If Gideon expected to see the man start at this he was deceived.

"Where will I find the hand that killed Dorsey Drake?"

"Why ask me?"

"Come, you are Sakkar, the head of the whole plot, though Paradox is an apt pupil. What did you throw to the waves to-night?"

The man in the ferret's grip seemed prepared for anything.

"You threw something into the river? Was it a vial of the deadly drugs you are master of?"

"You followed me, then?"

The admission was out at last; the man was Sakkar!

"I followed you," said the detective. "I was at your heels, and if I had been a little nearer that something would not have left your hand."

"You have tracked me a long time. You got out of the trap."

"I did. I was in your trap long enough, and you should not blame me for escaping, Sakkar."

"I don't. We should have killed you in the house, and not dropped you into the cellar."

"Thanks for your failure to do that," smiled Gideon. "But, let us come back to the river and what you threw into it. What was it, Sakkar?"

The cold nature of the old Hindoo seemed to unbend.

"If I tell you, will I be set at liberty?" he asked.

"Perhaps."

"That is not promise enough. I want to go back to the land of my people."

"After doing all the harm you can in this?"

"I have done nothing only carry out the oath of the Brotherhood."

"The Black Hand?"

"Yes."

"You murdered?"

In an instant the hand of Sakkar was stretched out, and he looked at it a moment before he spoke again.

"That hand has killed no one in America."

"Then, it was not yours that left its mark on the faces of Drake and Derrick?"

"It was not mine."

"But you hatched the plot; you laid the train and another touched it off."

No answer. The eyes of Sakkar were looking down the hall as if watching something on the floor.

"Sakkar, you can brush from the heart of a young girl all suspicions of guilt. You know who killed Dorsey Drake."

"Ask the girl."

In an instant the scene he had witnessed in the laboratory with Iris before him, rushed over the detective's mind, and his grip tightened on the Hindoo's arm.

"Do you charge Iris with the murder?" he cried.

"She went to him for a secret and he would not give it up."

"How do you know that?"

"The eyes of Sakkar are far seeing; his ears can hear when there are walls of stone around him."

"You old serpent of the East, you lie when you accuse Iris of killing Dorsey Drake!" said Gideon.

"She carried a dagger to the room. It has a needle's point and would bring forth no blood, though it would kill all the same. She took it from beneath her pillow in the Indian room and carried it with her when she went in search of the secret."

The detective looked at the speaker and felt that his blood was getting hot in his veins.

"It is a plot to condemn the girl," he said. "You are in it—may have hatched it, along

with the greater one. Iris guilty of murder? Old wretch, you lie!"

The muscles of the face before him did not move.

"The truth, or by heavens, I'll throw you from yon window!" cried Gideon.

Old Sakkar's face was as immobile as ever as he answered:

"She took the turquoise dagger to the room. The girl was under the spell and when she went back he was dead."

The ferret of Gotham almost dropped the man he held.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE DARKER MYSTERY.

THERE was nothing in the face of the old Hindoo to indicate that he was not dealing squarely with the truth.

Gideon Grip looked at him and saw nothing but fairness in his eyes.

If Iris was not guilty, why would he seek to fasten upon her the crime of the night of the fatal 10th?

"I want no lies; I will have none," said the New York ferret, sternly. "If the girl is innocent we will bring the truth to light and woe to the man who tries to cheat justice by fastening this crime upon the guiltless."

"Why would I seek to do that?" asked Sakkar.

Gideon Grip looked away for a moment and then back into the face before him.

"You are tracking me?" Sakkar said.

"I don't deny that; you are a person who should be tracked."

"You say you saw me cast something to the river."

"I did. What was it you threw away?"

There was no reply; the eyes of the Hindoo seemed to snap.

"Was it an instrument of death, Sakkar?"

"Do you think it was?"

The hand of the detective tightened about the old man's arm.

"If you gave to the water the secret of guilt, why flee the country?"

"My work is done. I am going back to my people."

"Leaving us in the dark as to the guilt of the girl you accuse? Come, Sakkar, this won't pay you in the long run. You are not going out of the city."

"Back home, then," grinned the old man.

But Gideon Grip was not inclined to take his prisoner back to the House of the Grinning God. He did not want to cross its threshold even though he knew the old man of magic was in his power.

"We will go elsewhere," he said.

"To prison?"

"No, not to prison if you open your mouth and tell me the truth."

"Why not let me talk here?"

Yes, why not?

Old Sakkar fell back as the ferret loosened his grip and the next moment was standing against the wall with folded arms, a statue cut in dark bronze.

Now he looked once more like Sakkar the Hindoo. Now he showed his little eyes and enabled the detective to say to himself that he was coming back to his true character.

"Is he going to tell me the truth?" thought Gideon. "Can I trust this Indian panther? He is a man of magic and death; he knows who killed Dorsey Drake. Will he fasten the crime on Iris when he talks again?"

The light burning against the wall in the basement room bare of nearly everything in the shape of furniture, revealed the old Indian while Gideon Grip watched him like a cat.

"Well, you see I am ready to listen to you," he said at length. "I will hear you now."

For a moment Sakkar looked into the ferret's eyes and then was seen to draw in a long breath.

"I am Sakkar the last priest of the Black Hand. I am called the Long Handed in my native country. I came to this country in search of the lost books of the temple. They were stolen years ago by an American who has been lost to us for a long time. We were sworn to recover those books, and when we left India on our mission it was decreed that those who came back without the books should be put to death at the altars of Vishkar. There were ten of us and I am the last. The nine went back empty-handed; they lost the trail of the American; they looked for him wherever Americans were to be found, but they failed."

"You did not fail, Sakkar?" said Gideon Grip.

"I found him!" the little eyes glittered as the old man spoke. "I found him—I, the last of the ten. Here in New York I found the trail of the ravisher of the sacred temple. I discovered the man who had stolen the books with the secret of life and death. I never slept till I had found him."

"You are a good tracker, Sakkar."

"I hunted him all over the city. I never gave up; that is why I discovered him. He was working at the elixir when he died—when the girl stole into the room that night."

The Hindoo was back to the same terrible accusation. He had again accused Iris of killing Dorsey Drake.

Gideon Grip felt his blood tingle in the very ends of his fingers. He glared at the old man and tried to fathom his soul through his lustrous eyes.

"What about the Man with the Maimed Thumb?" asked Gideon.

Old Sakkar started.

"That man is not a member of the Order of Vishkar—he could not be for there is blood in his veins which is not the holy blood of the Hindoo. He is a mixed cur—a man who is playing a game of his own."

"But your roof sheltered him; your hand protected Paradox."

"That is true. He tracked some for me. He wanted to take a hand in the game for me, but I saw through his designs. He was born in India, that man was; he came into the world in the shadow of the temple of Vishkar and we instructed him in some of the strange secrets of our religion; but he is not one of us."

"He belongs to the Black Hand, though?"

"His hand leaves a mark wherever it falls like no other hand in the world. He kills when he touches. Paradox is a death-wind."

"Where is he now?"

Perhaps old Sakkar thought of the man he had left on the floor of his little work-shop in the House of the Grinning God, with the serpent poison in his blood.

"I left him at the house," he said.

"But you did not tell him that you were going back to India?"

"I did not have to tell him my secrets."

Gideon Grip saw the foot of the old Hindoo glide along the floor, and before he could anticipate his intention, he was pounced upon with the agility of a tiger and borne back against the dull wall under the light.

"I don't want your blood, man-hunter," said the lips of Sakkar at his face. "I am going back to the temples of the Hindoos, and you shall not detain me. I have told you what I know—what he told me when he came from the house of the man who robbed the temples. The girl went to the room where Dorsey Drake, the American, looked for the elixir of life—went there with a dagger in her hand and when she went back to her room there was a dead man behind her."

"But on that face was the print of a hand—a hand without one thumb."

"Who said so?"

"Iris saw the mark."

"Did she tell you so, American?"

"She told me; and afterward, on the face of Captain Derrick, I saw the mark myself."

Old Sakkar said nothing for a moment, but Gideon saw that the grip of his dark hand did not relax.

"You are a hunter of men and secrets. Beware! This trail may end in darkness for you."

"I accept the risks," was the reply.

Sakkar drew the detective down the wall until they were at the door opening into the back-yard.

"Don't follow Sakkar!" he said. "Let him go back unmolested. Don't try to stand between him and the holy shrines of India."

There was no reply, though the look Gideon gave the speaker told that if he released him he would in all probability have a hunter on his track up to the moment of his quitting our shores.

Suddenly the hands of Sakkar seemed to sink into the detective's throat.

He had the strength of a lion, and Gideon, forced against the hard wall, looked into the face that grew devilish and darker all the time. He could not break the hold of those terrible hands, and though he tried to wrench himself loose from them, he was disappointed, and at last felt his limbs giving way beneath him and all was night, perhaps the night of oblivion.

He did not see the lithe figure of old Sakkar go back along the wall; he did not see it creep up the stairs and vanish where he had looked for him some time before.

He lay on the floor near the wall, his hands clinched and his face the color of the face of a man well choked.

The detective's return to consciousness was slow and perplexing.

When he opened his eyes he saw the same little jet blackening the wall above him, and there were the same shadows on the floor.

He staggered to his feet with a dull feeling in his head, and looked about the room.

Sakkar was gone!

After awhile Gideon got up and went to the door.

He must have remained a long time in the swoon, for the first flushes of another day were brightening the tall spires of the city.

He crept out upon the street and walked away.

No use to look for the old Hindoo in that building, for was he not on his way to India?

An hour later Gideon re-entered his own little room and sat down.

Iris guilty? This was the thought that was uppermost in his mind, and the longer he harbored it, the firmer hold it seemed to get.

He was still alone when he heard a footstep come up the stairs and stop at his door.

He wondered who was seeking him, and with his eyes riveted on the portal, he waited for it to open.

In another moment there stood before him a woman whose face was veiled.

As she crossed the room her hand went up and she removed the veil, revealing the features of Miriam.

The detective almost left his seat with a start.

"They let me out awhile ago," said Miriam, looking white and ghastly into the ferret's face. "I came out of the swoon much to the astonishment of the doctors, and the first place I sought was your den. I was here awhile ago, but you were not in."

Miriam took a chair, and laid one of her hands on the edge of the table.

"He found me—the same man who came to the other room that night with the gloved hand which has no thumb."

"But that hand has a thumb, Miriam," said Gideon, recalling his own interview with Paradox.

Miriam's look became a stare.

"There are not two of them, certainly," she said, half doubtingly. "It can't be that he has a double. I know Paradox has a maimed thumb, for I have seen it; but you say that he has not."

There was no answer for a moment when Miriam went on.

"He found me in the last retreat. I sent Mag to you and she did not come back."

"She unwittingly betrayed you to the Man with the Valise. She found him on my stairway, and he personated me. It was a piece of coolness, just like him, and he played it well. He beat Mag back home and found you alone."

Miriam thought a moment.

"When I felt the hand which he flung at me when I was in his power, I knew it was the same that left its mark on the faces of the dead men. I could not feel the print of a whole thumb, but the impression of a mutilated one was there."

"He showed me his hand and the thumb was a whole one."

Miriam shook her head.

"The mystery is as deep as ever," she said, in tones scarcely above a whisper.

Gideon Grip leaned forward and fixed his eyes upon her.

"Miriam, do you know that they accuse Iris?" he said.

She did not spring up with a cry as he expected, but fell back and stared blankly at him.

"They accuse her of what?" she asked.

How strangely cool she was! how her eyes watched him and how her nerves were kept at her command.

"They accuse her of using the turquoise dagger that night—of taking the life of Dorsey Drake."

"My God! the life of her—"

Miriam did not complete the sentence, but bent toward the detective and touched him with her white finger.

"Do you say that?" she asked. "They know they lie, yet, there is no telling what she would do under the spell and guided by the hand of the charmer. Gideon Grip, now you must bring the dark to light. Now you have something to fight for—the innocence of my child!"

And Miriam Marx rose and stood before the detective, a statue of animated marble.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE TURQUOISE DAGGER.

IT was some time ere Miriam Marx passed down the detective's stairs and out into the city once more.

"I won't go back to Mag's," she said. "He might find me there again and the next time I might not get off so easily."

Gideon Grip saw her go away with the promise that she would let him know her whereabouts when she found another hiding-place and with this, he was ready to go back to the mystery.

"I must see Iris. The girl must know what has been said, but not, perhaps, what I have seen."

Half an hour after these last events the ferret of New York found himself back in the house of secrets and waiting in the parlor for its beautiful inmate.

Presently Iris came down dressed in black with something white in her hand.

"He is coming home," she said, glancing at the letter which she had just read. "I did not write asking that he return, but he will be here to-night."

Gideon knew she meant the young man to whom she had plighted her troth before the exciting drama of her life opened, and before he could speak, she continued:

"It may seem strange to you, Gideon Grip, that I bear you no ill-will for depriving me of the bottle which you broke on the wall. At the time I could almost have daggered you, but now—now I thank you. I have changed the chamber where we met last. Will you come and see?"

The detective followed Iris up stairs and she opened the door of what had been called the Indian Room.

But it was such no longer. The Tiger rugs had vanished and the deities in ebony were gone. Iris smiled as the detective took it all in.

"The rugs are stored away for the fur-buyer and the gods have been given to the fire."

She stood before him pale, but singularly beautiful.

"I would not want Geoffrey to see them when he came," she went on, smiling. "I had them destroyed and now I am free from the drug."

"Then you know, Iris, that you have been in bondage?"

"I know. I know that I have done strange acts under the influence of the drug which you destroyed. I have lived two lives, at least it seemed so to me. Is it not so?"

"It is true. You have been both Iris Norman and a priestess of Vishkar."

"Then it was not all a hideous dream," cried the girl. "Then it was not a terrible delusion, a clot on the brain. Gideon Grip, you must stand between me and the rope."

She was near him now and one of her hands was gripping his arm; he felt the pressure of every finger.

"The rope, girl? What do you mean?"

"I found something this morning which I thought was out of the way forever. I ran across it while tearing out of this room the signs of my enslavement."

Iris went to her dresser and unlocked the drawer.

The next moment she turned to Gideon with something in her hand.

"I found this," she said, exhibiting a dagger, the handle of which was turquoise. "I discovered it accidentally, but in a place where some hand must have put it on purpose. Look! see the dark stain which runs half-way up the blade. It looks like blood. And the handle! see how it fits my hand!"

She wrapped her slender white fingers about the hilt and looked up into Gideon's face.

He felt a chill of horror sweep over his frame.

"Where did you find it, Iris?"

"Where no one but myself could have placed it," was the reply. "I had made in this room a secret hiding-place, the situation of which was a secret all my own. It was there I found this dagger with the dark stain just as you see it now."

She shuddered when she looked at the blade, and then at the man looking at her.

"Iris, were you with him that night?" slowly asked Gideon.

She did not speak. It seemed to him that her figure increased in stature, and that her eyes got new light.

"I was with him," she answered, without a quiver. "I was with him quite late that fatal night."

"You had a mission to the laboratory, Iris?"

"I had."

"Did it fail?"

She recoiled a step, and with her hand wound about the turquoise hilt, looked at him like a person in a dream.

"You say you went to him, that you had a mission. Did it fail?"

"He would not tell me," she cried, in a strange voice. "I begged him to give me the secret for which I have longed, but he would not."

"Did you take that dagger to the laboratory?"

A wild cry rung from Iris's throat, and she fell from him almost to the opposite side of the chamber.

"In God's name, what are you trying to do?" she exclaimed. "Do you think—"

She came toward him again, her lips firmly pressed together, and her face the color of snow.

"Iris, you have just begged me to save you from the rope," said the detective, coolly.

"Did I? Well, it was because I found this dagger in the hidden niche in the wall."

Was that it? Did the finding of the turquoise dagger draw from her the frantic appeal which had startled the level-headed ferret?

For some time Iris stood before Gideon without speaking.

"You are not going to save me! You intend to turn me over to the law?" she suddenly said.

"On the proof of that dagger, Iris?"

She looked at it, and then flung it on the table.

"It accuses me and breathes of the crime of the accursed 10th!" she said. "Look, don't you see it has an eye of green, that looks at me all the time? Why did I go to him that night? Why couldn't I wait, as he told me to? He said the secret would be told some day, but my blood was hot, and his coolness maddened me."

"Don't go too far, Iris. I am your friend."

"You my friend?—you are a detective, whose duty it is to bring the guilty to justice, and see them perish on the gibbet. That dagger, which never before lay in the niche in the wall, I found there this very day."

"Yet you say that the secret of the niche was known to you alone?"

She looked toward the place she had mentioned, and the ferret watched her closely.

"When you left Dorsey Drake that night, what was his condition?" he asked?

"He was standing in the room, still denying my petition."

"Then you did not strike him?"

She turned to him with the quickness of a cat.

"I—I don't know," she said. "I don't know what I did. My blood was hot, but the next morning I stole to the room, and saw on his face, as I have told you, the mark of the Black Hand."

"You are still sure of that?"

"I am. It was there. I left him alive in the room, but found him dead when I went back. Still the events of that night seem a dream to me. I sometimes think that I may have used the dagger in my rage, but the doctors found no wound on his person."

Gideon instinctively glanced at the blade lying on the table. He noticed how slender and needle-pointed it was.

"You think it would leave hardly any mark—I see that by your eyes"—cried Iris, snatching up the dagger and holding it before him. "I never saw one like it."

"How long has it been in the house?"

"I don't know. He brought so many things to this country from around the world, that this may have been one of them. I remember seeing several daggers in his collection."

"Then, you don't think you took a dagger with you to the room that night?"

Again the start and sudden cry.

"I don't know, but this dagger is new to my eyes, and to think that I should find it in the hidden niche in the wall!"

Gideon Grip picked up the blade and handled it in the warm sunlight that streamed into the chamber by the broad window. He looked at the turquoise hilt, almost transparent, saw in it the silken veins of its darker parts, and then examined the blade.

Iris, coming nearer, with her lips welded in suspense, looked on.

"Why, the hilt moves!" she suddenly cried as the hand of the detective twisted the green handle of the dagger.

Gideon Grip kept on twisting the hilt and at last it was in his hand.

"It is hollow!" he said, looking up into Iris's face.

The next moment he had taken from the hollow something rolled up like a bit of parchment. Iris's look was now a stare.

Leaning toward the light, Gideon opened the little roll and saw traced on the paper a lot of strange characters which looked like those in the stolen books of Vishkar.

"Can you read it?" cried the breathless girl.

"What says the oracle of the dagger?"

Gideon smiled.

"It is all Greek to me, but I know a man who is an adept in Indian lore—"

"Find him!" Iris suddenly clutched the detective's arm. "Go to him at once. The dagger may tell its secret."

At that moment a noise fell upon the ferret's ear; he sprang up and crossing the room, opened a door.

He was just in time to see a figure vanish some distance away.

"A spy in the house, eh?" he exclaimed, for he had recognized the tall figure of Zuleika the maid.

When he had looked a moment he went back to Iris.

Iris did not question him about what he had seen or heard, but with her eyes fastened on the writing taken from the hilt of the dagger, she stood near the table, waiting for him to go on.

"Hold! this is not Hindoo!" suddenly cried the Secret Shadower. "I begin to see through the writing which is but a scrawl calculated to deceive. It looks like the writing of a person in the hands of a mesmerist. I have seen something of this sort and I think I can decipher it."

He went to the window and Iris watched him from where she stood.

A new light seemed to have dawned on the mystery of the dagger.

Gideon Grip looked at the old paper in his hand and then glanced at Iris.

"Iris, is your friend a mesmerist?" he asked.

"My friend?" she cried.

"The man who sometimes comes to this house—the handsome person known in this drama of crime and mystery as Paradox."

The beautiful girl pressed her hand wildly to her temples.

"He can do anything," she said. "He can send one into a sound sleep. He used to visit my guardian."

"He gave you the secret drug which I destroyed, did he not?"

"He did. But you don't accuse him—"

"I accuse no one as yet, but the writing in my hand is another link in the chain of somebody's guilt."

CHAPTER XXXI.

A DANGEROUS CONFESSION.

If Gideon Grip was of the belief that he had seen the last of the old Hindoo, whom he had

tracked to the deserted house where he had lost him, he was mistaken.

Sakkar, while anxious to get back to the land of temples and cobras, seemed held back by a hand whose power he could not control.

Instead of going to the House of the Grinning God to look after Paradox whom he left there in a swoon, brought about by the sting of the serpent which guarded the vials, he crept down the streets of New York with the stealth that always characterized his movements.

"I could have killed the ferret, but I did not want to," he said under his breath. "If he can save the girl let him, but I will be far off and they can't drag me before their courts. The thieves of the sacred books are dead, and the man whose hand leaves a mark wherever it falls will not harm any one for a time."

Sakkar turned up in a distant part of the city, and when daylight came, crept up a narrow stairs and concealed himself on the second floor of an unpretentious-looking house.

He had no one at his heels now; he was safe, for the time at least, and drawing his long body into a knot, he threw it upon a cot and fell asleep.

As for the man he had left in the House of the Grinning God, he came out of the swoon, and stood erect looking at one of his hands while his teeth were buried in his lip.

Paradox suddenly broke into a laugh.

"Why did the old wretch let me live? That is what puzzles me," he said. "I felt the poison of that infernal serpent in my blood, but it is not there now, and nothing could have counteracted the virus but the antidote which old Sakkar owned. Has he gone back to India? Is he on the water now, making a trail which no detective can follow? And I am left! I am here to fight the battle out. Well, I know magic enough to compete with the cunning of the best of them. I hold some of secrets of the sect of Vishkar, and with my own cunning, I guess I can outwit you, Gideon Grip."

Paradox went to the window and looked out.

Another day had come.

Glancing at his hand where he saw two small punctures still a little red, he smiled again and turned back.

"I wonder if the vials are there yet?" he said, going to the work-bench and scanning the wall above it. "I can't see the button he touched, but it must be somewhere. I would like to find the bottles, though he may have carried them off with him. I wonder if he did?"

A short time afterward he was out on the street with his face so changed for the time that an eye as sharp as Gideon Grip's would have looked the second time before recognizing him.

He seemed lost all that day, but when the shadows of another night came he slipped across the carpet in one of the darkened halls in Iris Norman's house and came face to face with Zuleika.

The tall figure of the handsome maid fell back at sight of him, but in another moment she was at his side.

"You must not come here any more," said Zuleika, burying her hand in his sleeve.

"Why not, girl?"

"It isn't safe."

"Why isn't it safe?"

Zuleika had drawn him into her own room and her face was pallid.

This was the girl who carried a secret in her bosom. This was the same Zuleika who told him that she had seen him come out of the laboratory the night of the 10th.

"The man of clews is still on the trail," continued Zuleika, "and Iris has changed her chamber."

"The Asiatic room?"

"Yes; she has taken up the tiger rugs and has burnt the gods."

The handsome face of the dangerous Apollo wore a smile.

"Did the gods protest, Zuleika?" he asked.

"Of course not. With her own hands she gave them to the fire and then destroyed nearly all traces of orientalism in that room."

"What does she mean?"

"She means to wipe out every vestige of her enslavement."

Paradox looked astonished into the eyes before him.

"What do you know about that?" he asked.

"You are talking riddles to me."

The hand of Zuleika touched his arm.

"The time has come for me to declare myself," she said. "I have been burning these many days. You can never win this game."

With a sudden start he looked at her.

"What game?" he cried.

"I need not tell you for you know," she went on. "You can never win it, I say, for he is coming back. He will be in the city to-night!"

"Geoffrey Graeme?"

The name came unconsciously from his tongue.

"Yes. He is now on his way and there will be discovery if he and the man called Gideon Grip can bring it about. Those men will work together."

For a moment Paradox said nothing; his hands opened and shut and he seemed to reflect.

"You intend to betray me?" he said at last.

"Not for the world would I do that, not for the world, I say!" was the quick answer. "I know I hold a certain secret, but I would not betray you. On the other hand, I would save."

"You, girl? Do I look like a man in a trap?"

"You are in danger, nevertheless."

"Just because you saw me come out of a certain room on a certain night?"

"Isn't that enough?"

"In your mind, perhaps, but that would hang no one," he laughed. "I want to know how you would save me, Zuleika."

The tall girl took a long breath.

"You can't win this game because he is coming back and because the hand of that man, Gideon Grip, is closing in."

"Closing in on whom?"

"On the guilty."

"You don't believe anything of the kind, woman. I can see by your face that you don't."

"But you must hear me. Wait! the door is ajar."

She shut the portal and came back to him.

"Paul Paradox, I love you!"

The hard face of the Man with the Valise seemed to open with a smile.

"You must hear me through. This is the secret I have been guarding so long—this is the canker that has nearly gnawed out my heart. I love you: I gave you my very soul long ago and it was poison for me to follow you through the mazes of your game, to see you getting deep and deeper into the mazes of guilt, all to win the hand of a woman who loves you not."

Paradox was listening to all this with his eyes fixed on the fair speaker and his face a study.

"I have already done you more than one favor," continued Zuleika, her hands shut hard while she talked.

"You have, girl? What have you done?"

"I have broken the trail."

"How broken it?"

He put this question in the voice of one who doubted.

She seemed to recoil from answering it.

"Never mind; I have broken the trail, or in other words, I have thrown the detective upon another scent."

"You have set him after another quarry, you mean?"

"Yes, yes."

"You are very kind, Zuleika, but you were not told to do this. I am able to fight my own way clear of this persistent man who thinks he has nearly all the links of the chain. I did not expect you to take up my case."

"But I saw you in the shadow. I love you, Paul Paradox!"

A bitter laugh struggled to the man's lips.

"No one told you to do that, either," he said.

A horrid whiteness ashened Zuleika's face.

"Does one have to get permission to love?" she cried, blood mounting suddenly to her temples. "In the name of heaven, what sort of man are you?"

There was silence on Paradox's lips.

"You must not tell me that I have not given up my heart and its happiness for nothing!" she continued.

"No one told you to make this confession, girl."

Zuleika recoiled from him with the suddenness of one who sees a serpent in her path.

"If you don't hear me I will turn on you."

She regretted the words the moment they had left her tongue.

"I did not mean that," she exclaimed, clutching at his sleeve again. "I love you, Paul. If I am repulsed I will be in the shadow as deep as the deepest."

"How in the shadow?—you?"

"In your room sleeps the woman who is the prize of the game which you, as old Sakkar's companion, have played, partly to secure some of the secrets that old wretch knew, and partly to feather your nest."

"How could I do the latter? You know, Zuleika, that Dorsey Drake was really a beggar."

"They said so in secret—I know that. It has come out since his death that he was not the nabob the city thought him, but it was false. He was rich when death came."

"Prove it."

Zuleika looked at Paradox a moment and then moved across the room and out into the hall.

He waited for her return, and when she came in on tiptoe and motioned him forward, he left the chamber and joined her.

Paradox followed the tall form of Zuleika down a flight of steps between two walls, and saw her open the door of a dark room.

"One of the many secrets of this house," she whispered. "I think I have found them all."

In another moment she had struck a light, and was holding it before her.

Paradox saw a chest and an iron safe in the room. These were the only things that met his gaze, and when he saw Zuleika kneel before the latter, he leaned forward and looked with all eyes.

"There was no need of a secret lock here, he thought," said the girl, looking up at him. "He

did not come here often, but often enough to excite my suspicions."

"You followed him, did you?"

It took all the strength Zuleika had to throw back the iron door of the safe, and then holding her light near it, she smiled at the man at her elbow.

"There must be more than one hundred thousand dollars here," she said. "Iris knows nothing of this treasure-house. It belongs to us."

"To us?" he cried.

"It is ours! It belongs to its discoverers and the lips of the dead can never tell the story of its appropriation. Paul Paradox, I can bring you a dowry such as the creature up-stairs never dreamed of."

He looked from the treasure into her face. The eyes were burning like coals of fire, and he no longer doubted the passion of the tall maid.

CHAPTER XXXII.

ZULEIKA TURNS TRACKER.

"IRIS is the beggar, I the heiress!"

These words fell hot from Zuleika's tongue and rising she gazed at the Man with the Valise and waited breathlessly for his reply.

"We have no right to rob Iris," he said at last. "This belongs to her."

"You repulse me, then?"

"I have not said so; but this treasure is not ours."

Zuleika drew off and then sprung to the door of the safe which she shut before she spoke again.

"So be it!" she said. "Come, we will go back."

There was something in her tones that almost startled him.

Paul Paradox placed himself between the girl and the door in the wall.

"What are you going to do?" he said.

"What ought I to do? You have tortured me as woman has never been tortured. You have repulsed the only woman in this house who loves you and I am done for."

He seemed to smile.

"I never thought of this. I never for a moment thought that I was creating such a passion in your bosom."

"I am a woman," said Zuleika between clinched teeth. "Don't transform me into a tigress, Paul Paradox."

He would have smiled again but for the eyes that were regarding him.

"Come, I am going back. We will leave this wealth which, I say, is yours for the asking."

He made no reply, but followed her up the secret stairs and they soon stood in the chamber overhead.

"Do you want to see how she has blotted from her heart every memory of you?" suddenly cried Zuleika.

"What can you show me, girl?"

She went toward the Indian room and he followed. Touching the concealed spring that operated the door, she ushered him into the once handsome chamber and turned to him with a sinister smile.

"You see she isn't Hindoo any longer. She has lost the drug and is beyond the spell. When she comes here now it is as Iris, the ward of the dead, and she no longer stands before the mirror and sees her skin turn tawny and her eyes get a strange light, such as made her the child of the heathen goddess."

Paradox listened, but said nothing.

"This is the chamber fitted up at your suggestion," Zuleika went on. "You brought the rugs to her and old Sakkar furnished the ebony gods. You kept her under the spell until the hand of the ferret broke the vial on your wall. The stain of its lost power is there yet."

Zuleika pointed to a certain spot on the wall where Paradox could see a stain, undoubtedly that of the accursed liquid.

"I saw you the night you came to this house and threw over Iris's transom something that glittered. It was a new deity from the hands of Sakkar the god-maker. How do I know it? The next morning there was a new god on the dresser which Iris broke up on account of its baleful memories. You see what the losing of the spell has done? This young girl is out of its power, but she is in the grip of another woe just as dreadful."

"What is that?"

"Why ask me?" cried Zuleika. "Don't I know what I am about? You have laughed at my love, still trusting to play through the game you are at. You shall fail! My hand comes between you and the prize. Iris is in the darkest shadow that ever enveloped a girl like her. Why, her champion suspects her."

"Gideon Grip?"

"Gideon Grip."

The speaking of the ferret's name seemed to give Zuleika great delight.

"She is deeper in the shadow of death than ever was a girl of her years. The coil is tightening about her and there can be no escape."

"No escape from what?"

Zuleika leaned toward him and showed her white teeth in a grin which was more the grin of a devil than of one with heart and soul.

"You touch Iris at the peril of your life!"

"Do I? When did I threaten her? Did I intimate that I intended to do her bodily injury?"

"You must not touch her, I say."

Zuleika straightened in an instant and threw out one hand.

"As if you could stop me!" she cried. "I know what sort of mark your hand leaves on the human flesh; I have seen its print where you left it more than once. You talk to me about withholding my hand from any one. Paradox, even though you have learned death at old Sakkar's school, you must not think that I, woman though I am, hold you in fear. I came to this house with my eyes open and they have not closed in all of the time of my stay here. You must not think that because you know the secret ways of the Black Hand, I tremble when you come near me. I have confessed that I loved you. Now, Paul Paradox, receive the hate of Zuleika Dare!"

Never before had the tall maid looked so ravishingly beautiful. Hers was a beauty which Iris did not possess, but it was the beauty which nature gives to the soft sleek coat of the tiger. Such beauty is dangerous.

The hand of the maid fell upon his wrist and closed there.

"No more!" she said, leading him away.

"The outside of this house is the place for you." The Man with the Valise hung back, gazing into the face that confronted him and wondering what would take place there when he went away.

"You don't drive me out," he said. "I am here until I go of my own accord."

"Stay then," cried Zuleika, suddenly dropping his hand. "Stay till you rot here or fall into the iron grip of the avenger of justice."

He saw her spring across the room and her hand was on the door.

"Touch Iris, girl, if you dare!"

She laughed at him; she showed her teeth again, opened the portal and was gone.

For a moment he heard her feet beyond the door and then the sound died away.

"The devil is in that creature," he suddenly laughed. "If she had stayed another moment I would have had her in my power. But wait! I will play the trump the next time I run across her. I will show her that she can't baffle me after the game I have played."

Paradox turned away and looked toward the boudoir of the cause of the deep-dark plot of the Black Hand.

He seemed on the point of creeping to the door, but all at once turned in the opposite direction and vanished.

He stood in the laboratory alone.

The room was nearly dark, but he could see the bottles on the shelves, and the furniture which remained was the same as when Dorsey Drake's life went out.

A singular look came into his eyes as he stepped to the table and took up the wine-glass which Iris had replaced after the inquest.

Lifting it to his lips, he seemed to find there the subtle odor which had brought about the verdict of suicide for he smiled and suddenly replaced the glass.

"They had this glass, and it told a lie," he said.

In another moment he was among the shelves, his hand in quest of something which it did not find, for he turned away and left the room.

The Man with the Valise passed out of the house, but looked back when he struck the sidewalk.

Was he thinking of Zuleika?

Nearly an hour later he was to be seen glaring at the little door of the House of the Grinning God.

"I wouldn't find the old wretch there if I went in," he said under his breath. "He is on his way back to India, and may the seas devour him ere he is half-way across!"

Paradox went back with a farewell glance at the house and though he saw many a shadow, he did not see the one creeping after him.

It was not the shadow of the man of clews; not the nimble shadow of Gideon Grip, though at that very hour the detective was at work, but it was the shadow of the woman he had scorned.

Zuleika had followed from the house on the avenue the man she had worshiped.

She kept after him a long distance; she dogged his steps, never for a moment losing sight of him, but now and then clinching her hands and seeming to laugh at her efforts at tracking, but she followed him just the same.

After awhile she became aware that she was tracked herself.

Zuleika in looking back with innate fear, saw near her, with eyes that seemed to have lately discovered her, a person of her own sex.

Tracked by a woman!

Had Paradox a guardian angel who was hovering on his trail, ready to save him from harm? Zuleika fell back and glided into a doorway.

A parting look after Paradox told her that he was liable to be in sight for some time.

"I want to know who is tracking me," she said to herself. "If I am to have a person on my track, I want to be armed. That woman is coming on now. She is watching me, and I have been marked out by her for espionage."

Nearer and nearer came the patter of feet along that almost deserted street.

Zuleika held her breath as she leaned toward the open way and waited like a leopardess in ambush.

"I lost her somewhere in this neighborhood," suddenly said a voice, and a shadow fell into the hallway, showing Zuleika, at the same time the figure of the one who threw it. "She must have been the maid. I couldn't have been mistaken, for I have seen her before, and—Heavens! I must not lose her now."

Zuleika could hardly keep back a cry of alarm.

She knew the woman almost within reach of her hand.

It was Miriam, Miriam Marx.

All this while Paradox was escaping and Zuleika who wanted to follow him to his destination was raging with disappointment.

Miriam turned to the house so quickly that Zuleika, leaning nearly half-way out of the shadows of the hall, could not draw back in time to escape discovery.

The Woman Across the Street uttered a cry.

As her figure went across the pavement the agile body of the tall maid sprung upon her.

There was no one in sight,

"I have found you, have I?" gasped Miriam.

"Yes, to your sorrow!" hissed Zuleika, forcing her into the dark place.

"I want to see you. Zuleika, you know—"

"Not now nor here!" broke in the tigress in petticoats. "I have other work on hand and you may have interfered too much now."

"You have come from the home of my—"

"Never mind where I came from. Stay where you are!"

Miriam was flung against the wall with a strength she never thought the tall maid possessed and the next moment Zuleika was running down the street in hopes of overtaking the man she had shadowed.

But precious moments had been lost. Paradox had vanished and the baffled woman, grinding her nails into her palms, went back over the broken trail, having lost the Black Hand, perhaps forever.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE GREEN HILT'S SECRET.

PARADOX did not seem to know that he had a tracker on his trail for he did not look back in search of one.

He vanished so suddenly that Zuleika was nonplused and when she discovered that he was gone she turned back still anathematizing the woman who had been the cause of her discomfiture.

At one time she felt like going back to the hallway and finishing Miriam.

"If she tracks me again she will wish she had never seen the light of day!" said the tall maid harshly. "I won't be tracked by her, and I know enough to defend myself."

Zuleika went back to the house on the avenue.

She glared tigerishly at the door leading to Iris's room and at the same time clinched her hands as if she would like to have them at the white throat beyond.

But Iris was not in the boudoir as Zuleika suddenly discovered, for she caught sounds of voices in the parlor and the next moment she was listening at the door.

"He is there," she said to herself. "He is ahead of time and they are together once more. Now Paradox will have another man to fight and Iris will tell him everything."

If she could have looked into that room she would have seen a young man alone with the beautiful victim of the Black Hand's plot.

The lover had come back to the city, and from what Zuleika heard, Iris was narrating the story of her life during the past few weeks.

At the same time in the laboratory moved another man who had the face and figure of the Secret Shadower.

Gideon Grip had accompanied young Graeme to the house, and while he was listening to Iris's story, he (Gideon) was looking over the same ground he had hunted a score of times.

He had left the house with the writing found in the hilt of the turquoise dagger in his possession, and his declaration that it was another link in the chain of somebody's guilt, had not been explained to Iris.

By and by a knock sounded on the door of the laboratory and the detective opened it.

Geoffrey Graeme came in.

"I adhere to my first expressed belief," said the young man, with earnestness. "Iris is innocent."

A smile came to the lips of the ferret.

"You don't answer me," cried the lover.

"You look, even smile, but say nothing."

"I need not answer you, but shall let the future show the proof of guilt."

"My God, you don't believe that Iris used the dagger that night?"

"She came to this room with it. She now believes that she did so, though she seems to have been under the spell of the Indian drug."

"That accursed drug!" cried Graeme. "Iris never intended to take the life of the man who gave her a home."

"She wanted his secret, though," put in the cool detective.

"She admits that; she says she begged him to tell her who she was, that she even held the dagger over her head; but it is no proof that that blade had a turquoise handle, and she says she never saw such a dagger in this house before she discovered it in the hidden niche."

"The niche, whose secret no one knew but herself!"

The detective's answer seemed a blow fairly in the face, and Geoffrey Graeme recoiled.

"I see. You are going to enmesh me if you can," he said. "You are continually putting the darkest hand forward. Do you believe—can you for a moment think Iris guilty of this murder?"

The countenance of the cool-headed ferret did not change.

"We don't know some things till we have been brought face to face with them," he replied. "We must keep to this trail and if it brings Iris out guilty, why—"

"But it can't do that," broke in the lover.

"It shall not bring her out with the blood of Dorsey Drake on her hands."

Listening to this duel of words and crouched in the darkness that prevailed between two walls, was Zuleika, her eyes blazing in her head and her breath going in short gasps of excitement.

She had slipped down one of the secret stairways of the house and was taking in every word that came to her ears from the laboratory.

"The detective, with all his shrewdness, can't get her out of the net—that is very plain to me," she said to herself. "She is in the meshes, and there she will perish like a fly in the web of the merciless spider."

She stayed where she was until sounds told her that the two men were quitting the chamber, and then she slipped back up the dark steps and sought her own room.

Gideon Grip left the house alone.

He left young Graeme with the woman he loved, and he and Iris could talk over the dark state of affairs, for, look at it as he would, the young man was forced to admit that the dagger was the darkest thing against Iris.

The ferret went back to the little den he occupied, and he had hardly taken the chair at the table, where he thought out some of the puzzles of his detective career, when he was startled by a hurried step at the door.

Miriam came in, her eyes seeming to start from her head, and her body in a tremor.

"Zuleika has turned tigress this time," said Miriam, leaning over the table and looking down into the detective's face. "I have felt at my throat the hands of the tall, dark-faced woman who is Iris's maid."

"Not on the street, Miriam?"

"On the street!" and Miriam proceeded to tell the story of her desperate encounter with Zuleika in the open hallway.

"That woman must be watched," continued Miriam. "She was tracking some one, or seemed to be from what she hissed in my ears ere she threw me against the wall."

"Tracking some one?" echoed Gideon Grip. "There are but two persons whom she would be likely to track—old Sakkar and Paradox. That she was not looking after the old Hindoo, I am pretty certain."

"It must have been Paradox, then."

When Miriam had quieted down, she took a seat at the table and watched the detective take from a drawer, which he unlocked, the turquoise dagger which he had brought from the house on the avenue.

"Heavens, what is that?" cried the woman.

"Probably the dagger that finished Dorsey Drake."

Miriam shuddered.

"You have found it; your cunning brought it to light. Did you unearth it in the house?"

"Iris found it."

"Iris! Where was it?"

"In her Oriental chamber—in a niche in the wall, the secret of which she avers no one knew but herself."

Miriam Marx fell back still glaring at the dagger which lay on the table.

All at once she pounced upon it and snatched it up.

"This shall never be used as proof against my child! This shall never stare her in the face and make the world believe that she took the life of—"

She did not complete her sentence for Gideon Grip, springing up, seized the dagger and tore it from her maddened hand.

"You have not seen all," said he, keeping his accustomed coolness. "You know nothing of the paper which we found in the hilt of the turquoise blade."

"The paper?"

Gideon took from an inner pocket the scrawl which he spread before him and saw Miriam lean forward to read it if she could.

"Was that concealed in the hilt of the dagger?"

"It was."

"Does Iris know it?"

"She saw me discover it."

"What did she say?"

"It startled her. She declared that she did not know that the dagger's hilt was movable."

"What do you think?"

The eyes of the woman encountered the gaze of the city ferret.

"Iris wrote what is here," he said.

"What! wrote the words you have before you if words they are?" exclaimed Miriam. "Why, she says she never saw the dagger though it was found in the secret niche in the wall of her room. We must believe her, Gideon Grip; you must not go upon the assumption that the finding of that dagger in that niche condemns her."

"I do not, Miriam. On the other hand, I think it is a bit of proof in her favor."

"A bit of proof for Iris?"

"Yes."

"In the first place, the girl has been under the strangest spell ever known. Not only was she under the influence of a drug, the secret of which was known to no one in this country but old Sakkar, the last priest of Vishkar, but she was also in the grip of the mesmerist, Paradox."

"The man I saw come out of the house of death the night of the 10th?"

"The same man."

"Go on."

"While, under the spell of mesmerism Iris wrote what we read on this paper. It looks like a scrawl, but when you come to compare her handwriting with the letters before us you find that both are strangely alike."

"What is on that paper? What is the proof that Iris wrote it?"

"It is a confession of murder."

Miriam recoiled, and her hand fell from the table while a cry issued from her throat.

"You are determined to condemn her, Gideon Grip."

"Wait," coolly said the man who watched her closely. "I don't intend to condemn any one who may be innocent. This writing is a confession of murder. It was written by the hand of Iris; it is signed by her, though the name is not the one we are accustomed to use when speaking of her. You have told me that Iris is your child. You did not christen her Iris, did you?"

A sudden pallor overspread Miriam's face.

"We did not."

"You called her—"

"Bertah. On her arm appears the same name, and it has puzzled her a thousand times."

"Here is the name affixed to this paper. The writer confesses to having killed Dorsey Drake, and with this very dagger."

"Merciful heavens, Iris is doomed!"

"No," said Gideon. "She is saved. The real author of this document overstepped caution and safety."

"Then you know who placed the dagger where it was found?"

There was no reply, but the ferret's look told Miriam much.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A FATAL SECRET.

If Zuleika had kept Paradox in sight, and clung to the trail he made the night she was interrupted by Miriam Marx, she would have made a startling discovery.

The Man with the Valise dodged into an alley where he was soon lost sight of, but in a moment he turned up in the cramped court of a strange-looking house, the door of which he struck with his gloved knuckles.

The portal was opened by a man whose eyes looked Paradox over from head to foot and finally admitted him.

Passing through a dark hall with the usher at his elbow, the man of tricks was admitted to a room where he found lying on a cot, which was little better than a mass of rags, a man whose dark skin and sharp features caused him to resemble old Sakkar.

"I am here at last," said Paradox, seeing how the man started at sight of him. "You remember I promised I would not come back until I actually needed your assistance."

A slight nod told that he had been heard.

"That time has come," continued the Man with the Valise. "Are you ready to help me?"

A long skinny hand was put out from beneath the scanty covering, and the eyes before him seemed to shrink back into the head on the dirty pillow.

"Where is your companion?" asked the old man.

"He has gone back."

"What, back to India?"

"Back to the temples and the snakes."

"Are you sure he has gone?"

"There is no doubt of it."

"When did the vessel sail?"

"No vessel has left port since I parted with the old rascal, but he is booked for India all the same, and ere this is as good as on the sea."

"Did he leave any of his secrets with you?"

"Not one," said Paradox.

"Sakkar is a sharp one; he must have accomplished his work here, for the priests of Vishkar were not to return without the lost books or their destruction and the death of the robbers."

"All that has been done."

"Are you sure of it?"

"I am."

"Then Sakkar was at liberty to go back."

"Look here; I am in this room for the last time; you ought to know why I am here."

There was no answer.

"I believe I am the only person who knows that you are one of the enemies of the Black Hand. I have known it all along, but have kept the secret from Sakkar. You are of the Silent Circle, the order which opposed the Black Hand in India and which sent you out to prevent Sakkar from carrying out his oath. You are the head of the Silent Circle and you know as much black art as the priests of Vishkar."

"You think so, but you might overrate my knowledge," grinned the man on the cot.

"There were times when I could have thrown you into the meshes of Sakkar's web," continued Paradox. "I saw you more than once in the house on the avenue; I knew what you were after—not the life of Dorsey Drake nor the books of the old temple, but you wanted to prevent the work of the Black Hand from being completed."

"Well, we have failed."

Paradox smiled and for a moment looked away to where smoke was rising from a brazier on the table.

"Yes, Dorsey Drake is dead."

"So is the British captain who was with him in the land of the cobra."

"Both are dead; the robbers of the temples paid dearly for their search for the books of secrets."

"They felt on their persons the mark of the deadly hand."

There was no reply for a moment, and Paradox moved his right hand out of sight.

"What do you want? We might as well come to business."

"I want the mate of the green-hilted dagger."

The old Indian showed his yellow teeth in a sudden smile.

"You are too late," he said.

"Too late? Impossible!"

"It has passed beyond my hands."

"The turquoise dagger?" cried the Man with the Valise. "It cannot be!"

"But I swear by the sacredness of my religion. It is beyond my hand. I had it once, but I have it no longer."

"Into whose power did it fall?"

The lips in front of Paradox seemed to unite with resolution.

"You refuse to tell me?" he cried, bending over the cot and fixing his baleful eyes upon the man thereon.

"I am oath-bound."

"But you must tell me! By heavens, you shall not keep me from that which might save a young girl from the gallows."

"Have you turned rescuer?" asked the man on the bed, drawing back and looking at Paradox with eyes sparkling with derision. "I didn't know the tiger ever showed mercy."

Paradox did not relish this sally, but he kept his cool temper.

"I want to know into whose hands that dagger passed," he said. "It killed Dorsey Drake."

"But the hand of the hunter was seen on his skin. Iris, as they call her, saw it there after the murder."

"So she says, but that matters not now."

"Don't you believe that the hand which left its marks behind took the man's life?"

"I know it didn't. But I want to know the secret of the loss of the dagger."

"There were two of them, you say?"

"Yes, the other was in Dorsey Drake's cabinet. It is there yet."

"You are sure of this?"

"I have seen it there within the last few hours. I saw it there time and again while he lived, for I was a frequent visitor to him, in the very room where he searched for the elixir of life."

"We knew that all along. You went to him, not in your true guise, for if he had known that you were Sakkar's companion and fellow-hunter, you would not have been admitted to the house; but you went there under other feathers. You don't think that we knew nothing of what you did, eh?"

"I don't care what you think," was the quick response. "I am here, with the life of a young girl trembling in the balances of fate."

"Was Derrick killed by the same hand that took the life of Dorsey Drake?"

"No, he was not."

"Old Sakkar did not kill either, for it was against his religion to shed blood with his own hands."

Paradox looked across the room again. He saw nothing of the man who had admitted him to the place.

The next moment he bent over the occupant of the cot, and suddenly darted at him like a hawk.

There was no cry, no movement beyond the sudden drawing up of the shriveled body, for the hands of Paradox were at the brown throat, and his eyes were looking murder.

"Who took the dagger from you?" he cried, hoarsely. "I want to know this, and I will know it or you will pass to your fathers without ceremony."

The eyes beneath him seemed to start from their owner's head, and the grip of Paradox tightened.

"Will you tell me?" he went on. "Will you give up the secret? I must know."

There was no answer that pleased him. He held the throat fast, and glared tigerishly at the face before him.

He seemed to be pressing the old man into the depths of the cot, and the cords were ready to snap with their weight.

Paradox saw that he was dealing with a stubborn piece of humanity, for the countenance gave him no hope, and he wondered if the old wretch would not be dead in a few seconds.

"You need not suffer for the breaking of your word with the person to whom you gave the dagger," he went on. "I will keep the secret, but will save Iris."

As there was no reply he drew back and looked at his victim.

"God! he is dead!" cried Paradox. "I have finished the career of the Chief of the Silent Circle—the order that opposed the Black Hand."

He stood erect and looked down upon the man on the couch.

At last he ventured to turn on the light a little more and take another look.

Death had set its seal on the face beneath him.

The old wretch was beyond the betrayal of any one, and Paradox saw that he had helped him out of the world before his time.

"It can't be recalled now," said he. "He could have saved his own life if he had betrayed the slayer. But he would not and met his fate, perhaps not undeserved."

He turned away after lowering the light and slipped from the room. He passed from the house without being seen and once more found himself on the streets of Gotham.

A dark secret was behind him. He knew what lay still and ghastly on the pallet in the little chamber, but this did not quicken his steps.

Paradox was not gone an hour when the man who had admitted him to the house stole back into the room and looked at the occupant of the couch.

"Gone, has he?" he said, moving forward and bending over the old man.

Of course there was no reply.

The next instant his eyes were starting from his head. He fell back, turned on the light till it showed every nook and cranny of the room and then stood in the middle of the floor like a person mad with fright.

"He left his mark, that man did!" he cried. "There is the print of a demon hand on the old man's face. I see it plainly. He came here to kill and accomplished his purpose."

He moved a little closer by degrees and saw again the dark imprint on the face of the dead. It was darker than the face itself which no death could whiten.

"There are five marks, but one is short. There was no thumb to his hand!" he said, looking still. "Who was he? And what did he want here?"

The question was not answered and the frightened man ran out of the house and slipped down the alley as if the hand with the maimed thumb were reaching for his own short stretch of throat.

As for Paradox, he went back to the room he had left last.

He shut the door and locked it.

"The detective will win the most terrible victory of his life," he muttered. "Gideon Grip is on the eve of a horrible discovery. A thousand curses on the head of the old wretch who valued a secret more than his life!"

And Paradox, drawing the dark glove he wore, held up in the light of his jet a hand which owned but the stump of a thumb.

CHAPTER XXXV.

BROUGHT TO BAY.

GIDEON GRIP had gone to a trail which a few days previous he had not thought of.

The discovery of the turquoise dagger in the secret niche in Iris's room seemed to have furnished a new clue which did not take him back to the trail of the Man with the Valise.

Miriam could not understand why or how Iris should write out the confession of murder and hide it in the dagger and then say that she had not placed it in the hole in the wall. Equally dark to her was the detective's story that he expected to prove the girl innocent despite the almost insurmountable evidence of the bloody blade.

Gideon stood one night—it was the one after his last interview with Miriam on the street—with his eyes fastened on the house on the avenue.

The surroundings of Iris's home were quiet and no one came or went.

Like a statue the ferret of Gotham watched the place and knew that the hours were passing and that it was nearly twelve.

At last the front door of the mansion opened and a female figure slipped down the steps.

Still the detective did not stir, but watched the woman glide off, her face well concealed by

the folds of a shawl and her figure dressed in close-fitting black.

The detective tracked this person down the street and saw her run up the steps of a house he had not shadowed for some time—the House of the Grinning God.

The deity in black grinned over the door as if unaware of its master's flight and showed its teeth in the light of the nearest lamp.

When the door had closed on the person thus tracked, the man of claws drew nearer and this time he entered after his prey.

He seemed afraid of traps and pitfalls no longer.

In the house he found himself alone. No noises told him of the presence of another, yet he knew that he was not the sole inmate of the old place.

Gideon crept up the steps down which on a former occasion a writhing serpent had come with open mouth and deadly fangs and stood at last among the shadows of the corridor overhead.

Presently a light attracted the detective and he went toward it.

A door was between him and the room from whence the light came and it might be locked.

Who was beyond that portal?—the person he had tracked to the house from Iris Norman's home?

Gideon Grip waited some time for the person in the room to come out, but as there were no signs of his being accommodated, he laid his hand on the knob.

As he feared, the door was locked on the inside.

The detective turned back and waited once more in the shadows.

Not for a moment did he take his eyes from that door.

Beyond it seemed to lie the solution of the mystery he had tracked so long.

At length he heard a noise which delighted him.

A key had turned in the lock, and he saw in the light revealed by the opening of the door, the tall figure of a woman.

In another moment she stood in full view.

Zuleika the maid was almost within reach of the ferret's hand!

She did not see him; her eyes seemed to burn with unnatural light, and were riveted on the end of the corridor.

But was this Zuleika?

Gideon Grip doubted it while he gazed at the creature, for her face seemed to have aged greatly within the last few hours, and instead of the freshness of youth she had the wrinkles of advancing years.

It was as if the maid had thrown off her old identity and taken on another.

He continued to watch her with all eyes, and saw her come down the corridor, her step almost stealthy and her hands clinched.

He shrunk into the wall, as it were, intending to let her pass and follow, but all at once she saw him and stopped.

The searching eyes of Zuleika could not be cheated, and in a moment Gideon knew that he was no longer hidden from her.

The girl stood and gazed at him, first with a mad stare and then with a smile at the corners of her finely chiseled lips.

It was a smile in which defiance and derision were mingled.

"Zuleika, I want you," said the ferret breaking the silence.

"You want me?" she echoed. "For what, Gideon Grip?"

"Shall we go down to the lower floor? You know the chambers of this old trap."

"We will go back to the room I have just left if that will suit you."

How cool she was! How steady was her voice, without a tremor, and her eye an orb of tranquillity.

"Back to the room, then," said the detective.

Zuleika turned and led the way back, watching at the door for him, and when he was across the threshold, shutting it behind him.

She turned on the light, letting it into every place in the chamber, and then looked at him.

"Will you sit down, Gideon?" she asked.

But the ferret shook his head, and remained standing.

"If you will not sit, I will," and Zuleika dropped into a chair and looked up at him once more with the old smile.

"What do you want to know? You have tracked me hither."

"I have, Zuleika. It seems to me that you are the person who should be tracked just now."

There was no answer, but her look meant something.

"Girl, you have been playing a deep, dark hand," he went on a moment later.

"Too deep for you, Gideon?"

"Almost."

The girl smiled.

"You are a charmer—I don't mean a charmer of men alone, but a fascinator of your own sex," Zuleika started.

"You have been at the altar of mesmerism. Your eyes are not deep for nothing; you know how to look a person in the face, and woo them to the singular sleep of the spellbound."

"Don't be too sure of what you say. I may not be the terrible person you picture me."

"You have learned of old Sakkar. You have visited the House of the Grinning God, not to see the man for whom you have a devouring passion, but to hold converse with the old priest of Vishkar, who even now is on his way to India."

"Are you sure he is, Gideon Grip? Have you tracked Sakkar of the Black Hand to the vessel?"

"No, but I know that he is on his way back to the land of snakes and heathen temples. And you have been his scholar. You have obtained some of his secrets."

"Do you think so?"

"He discovered that you, though a woman, possessed the subtle powers of the mesmerist. You have tried your hand on a young girl who this night stands in the shadow of death."

It seemed to Gideon Grip that the lips of Zuleika curled proudly.

"You have had Iris under the spell of your powers," he went on. "I broke the spell of the drug, but yours was almost as potent. How did you discover that the word 'Bertah' was tattooed on Iris's arm?"

"Do you know it is there?"

The tall girl had turned questioner, but the ferret soon put an end to the inquisition.

"You played a bold hand when you discovered this. You then went to work; you enmeshed Iris in a web of death which is almost impossible to break. You had the dagger—"

He stopped, thinking that Zuleika was about to quit the chair, but though she started, she did not rise.

"You went a step too far. You threw Iris under the spell of your peculiar powers and dictated to her the words which you hid in the hilt of the turquoise blade."

"You are very plain," said Zuleika.

"You did all this, and more," continued Gideon, scarcely noticing the interruption. "You carried the blade to the secret niche which your prying eyes had discovered and placed it there to be found by the unfortunate girl and make her her own executioner."

Zuleika left her chair and her figure towered before the cool detective.

"Don't you know that you have no proof of all this?" she asked. "It is simply a desperate cast of the dice, the last throw you have at your command, Gideon Grip."

"I shall prove something before I am through," he answered. "Do you imagine that Iris in making her confession would not use paper of her own?"

The eyes of Zuleika became fixed.

She saw the hand of the detective dive beneath his coat, and the next moment a piece of paper fell on the table before her.

She followed the fall of the paper and watched it for a moment.

"That is a bit of your private stationery from your boudoir," he said.

"Thief! robber!" hissed the white lips of the tall maid.

"And here is the confession found in the hilt of the dagger. Don't you see that the pieces of paper are the same? Iris never had such in her possession. Do you think she would go to your room for paper on which to trace her own guilt?"

There was no reply. Zuleika stood before him, her eyes watching him like a cornered mouse watches the cat, and her hands shut hard.

The maid seemed at the end of her tether.

"You have played this game nearly out," she said, at last. "You have picked up link by link the chain of somebody's guilt. You try to fasten upon me the murder of Dorsey Drake. What do you say to the hand Iris saw on his face after he was dead? Was that my hand?"

"It was not. It came to the face after the killing—after you had glided from the room with blood on your soul, and the dagger in your grasp."

"Why should I kill Dorsey Drake?"

The detective seemed to lean toward Zuleika. Their eyes met, and he lowered his voice.

"Do you want me to breathe the secret you have kept so well?" he said. "Why should you kill him, is it? Woman, in the heat of your love for a villain, you thought that if the young girl for whose hand and supposed wealth he was playing, while assisting old Sakkar, was out of the way, you would possess him. You dared not kill Iris, but your plot went deeper than that. You stole to Dorsey Drake's room that night. You came upon him, perhaps, after he had had the scene with Iris. You killed him with cool deliberation, and the mesmerizing and the 'confession' was but one of the coils you wove about her."

Gideon Grip looked away for a moment, and when he turned to Zuleika, wondering what she would say to his last accusation, he found her at a stand on the other side of the room.

"What a merciless unraveler of secrets you are," she said. "You will call this your most brilliant case, I suppose. Give me a chance to get even."

"To get even, Zuleika?"

"Let me hunt down the man for whom I lost my soul."

There was bitterness in every word. She had been driven to the wall.

"Let me find him, will you?" she went on. "Give me one night's time. Like the paroled prisoner I will come back to you, Gideon Grip. I will return and feel your grip which lets nothing guilty escape."

He saw how earnest she was.

"That would not be unraveling the mystery of the Black Hand," he said.

"Why wouldn't it? Don't you know that he is somewhere in this city—that Paradox will escape you unless you let me find him?"

"I will risk that."

Zuleika seemed to see that she was beaten.

"I will take you back to Iris," he said. "Back to Iris first. She must hear from your lips the true story of the death of her father."

A cry broke from Zuleika's throat.

"Her father?" she cried. "Heavens! I have suspected that a thousand times since."

"And did you know that the woman who watched from across the street, the ceaseless looker-on, the creature who saw Paradox come out of the house that night, was Iris's mother?"

There was no cry now. Zuleika's lips met and she only stared.

"You won't let me out to hunt him down—to blot out forever the mark of the Black Hand?" she suddenly cried.

"I can't, girl."

"Then, we will go down," she said, but the moment she stepped forward smiling at him as before, the detective saw in the depths of her eyes a light never seen there before.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

OUT OF THE MAZE.

A MAN was slipping through a clump of shadows, with another on his track.

Not far off rolled the river, and the waves dashing against the pier, sung the direful dirge of the nightly suicides.

With the tread of cats both men neared the river, and the foremost one stopped at the edge of the wharf, but in the shadows that prevailed there, and looked back.

Suddenly his hand was lifted, and he threw something from him.

Having done this, he turned and went back.

"You old rascal, you haven't gone back to India any more than I have," grated his watcher, drawing back among the shadows. "I am going to make the last attempt to wrest from you the secret you carry, not the one about the drug, but the other one. You have given Zuleika some of your powers. You have schooled her in the black arts, and she has used them against the innocent."

Back over the streets of Gotham slipped the old man. Back to the scene of so many adventures in our drama of mystery, the House of the Grinning God.

Sakkar, who had stolen from his hiding-place, was going back to the house for the last time.

And close at his heels was Paradox, the plotter.

Old Sakkar reached the house and entered; the serpent behind him did the same.

Five minutes later the figure of Sakkar appeared on one of the flights of stairs and stooped half-way down.

"Why don't you come on?" said a voice from below and the old Hindoo, looking down, saw the figure at the foot of the steps.

Paradox—Paradox with the gleaming eye of a devil, Paradox, the man who had helped him to recover the lost book of life.

For a moment Sakkar seemed to look into the upturned face of his late companion and then he went down.

He seemed to laugh out of his little eyes and when he stood almost within reach of Paradox's arms, he drew back and inclined his head forward.

"Why don't you come on?" said the man in the hall.

Old Sakkar reached the bottom of the steps and threw out his dark hand.

"I know your grip," he said. "I know that your hand has the power of leaving a mark on the skin wherever it touches—that you have a thumb which now and then is a full member, thanks to the arts, but nearly all the time it is but half a thumb."

"You have discovered that, have you?"

"I have discovered that."

It seemed to Sakkar that the man below was about to spring up the steps and seize him, for he drew back again, but only for a moment.

The next moment his body went flying through space and he alighted squarely on Paradox's shoulders.

The attack bore the well-planted watcher toward the wall and Sakkar managed to keep from his throat the dreaded fingers of the Man with the Maimed Thumb.

"You must see what is in the upper room," said the old Indian.

"What is there?"

"A dead person."

"Nonsense!" cried Paradox. "It is but a trick of yours to break my grip."

"By the heart of Vishkar, it is not!" was the answer.

"We will go up and look."

Strangely the two men fell apart and went up the steps together.

Sakkar opened a door and turned to Paradox.

"Where is the dead person?"

"In yonder."

Paradox leaned forward, for the light in the room was not of the best, and to him there was nothing in there but the shadows of the queer-looking furniture.

The following moment the figure of Paradox fell headlong into the room and the door shut.

"The old villain!" cried the Man with the Maimed Thumb, turning to the portal with a curse.

He seized the knob and wrenched it madly, but the door did not open.

Then he drew back and took a hasty survey of the place.

"Heavens, it is here, sure enough!" he cried, falling back from an object he had not seen until then.

Near one of the walls lay something strangely human in outline.

He neared it and then fell back with a start—ling gasp.

"The tall maid—the tigress of Iris's house!" he exclaimed, for in the dim light lay the body of Zuleika.

The girl was dead, dead in the House of the Grinning God, the fittest place for her to die in.

Gideon Grip was looking into the pale face of Miriam who stood before him, and she was listening to the story that fell from his lips.

"And you left her alone in that house!" asked Miriam.

"Yes, she pleaded so hard. I gave her two hours. She promised at last to find Paradox for me."

"Zuleika will betray you," was the reply. "You won't find her there when you go back."

The detective looked at his watch.

"Her time is up. Will you go with me?"

"No, I go to Iris."

They parted on the sidewalk below the detective's den, and he watched the figure of Miriam vanish in the shadows of street and building.

"She believes me now," he said, with the look of one who has won a hard-fought game. "She knows that despite the evidence of the turquoise dagger Iris is innocent. She knows that Zuleika killed her husband, but not that Paradox was a witness to the murder, and afterward, to shield the maid, touched the dead man's face with that hand which leaves a mark."

A few minutes later Gideon Grip stood beneath the roof of the House of the Grinning God.

It was for the last time.

Had Zuleika kept her promise to him? Had she gone out and found Paradox?

He went up-stairs and stopped at a door.

"She promised to meet me in here," he said, pushing it open.

One look seemed enough.

Gideon Grip discovered on the floor where it had startled Paradox, the body of the tall maid.

"I thought you would come!" said a voice behind him.

That instant the ferret turned and faced the speaker.

The Man with the Valise sprung out of the shadows.

The agile detective did not shun the encounter, but went toward it.

Paradox found himself gripped as never before and forced back over the form of the tall maid. He felt at his throat the hands of the sleepless ferret, the man who had tracked him through light and shadow, fearless now of the hand that killed.

In the soft lamplight of the last November day, with her graceful figure revealed and with Miriam looking proudly into her lustrous eyes, stood Iris.

Out of the trap! free from the hideous spell of the Black Hand at last!

The past, or much of it, seemed a dream to the fair young girl and she looked toward Miriam and murmuring, "Mother," stole to her side and encircled her with her arms.

The next moment the door opened and Gideon Grip came into the room.

The women looked at him and smiled.

"The king of secret-solvers!" said Miriam, "the man who at no time gave up the hunt. What is the latest, Gideon Grip?"

"An old man has been killed in crossing a street down-town and the temple of Vishkar has lost its Sakkar forever. Then, Paradox, after explaining how he played his game, and after showing me with the coolness of a Thug how he deceived me the night he showed me a whole thumb, has cheated the law by taking his own life, so that we are the only living actors of the dark drama played by the Black Hand."

It was true. The game was out, the mystery of Dorsey Drake's death was a mystery no longer, and, with Iris, or "Bertah," on the eve of becoming Geoffrey Graeme's bride, Gideon Grip could go to another trail, but not to one as exciting or bristling with mystery and peril as the one from which he had just stepped.

THE END.

- 192 The Lightning Sport; or, The Bad Man at Slaughter Bar. By W. R. Eyster.
- 193 The Man in Red; or, The Ghost of the Old Guard. By Capt. F. Whittaker.
- 194 Don Sombrero, the California Road Gent; or, The Three Men of Mount Tabor. By Capt. Mark Wilton.
- 195 The Lone Star Gambler; or, The Maid of the Magnolias. By Buckskin Sam.
- 196 La Marmoset, the Detective Queen; or, The Lost Heir of Morel. By Albert W. Aiken.
- 197 Revolver Rob, the Red-Handed; or, The Belle of Nugget Camp. By Jos. E. Badger, Jr.
- 198 The Skeleton Schooner; or, The Skimmer of the Sea. By Col. Prentiss Ingraham.
- 199 Diamond Dick, the Dandy from Denver. By Buckskin Sam.
- 200 The Rifle Rangers; or, Adventures in Southern Mexico. By Capt. Mayne Reid.
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- 205 The Gambler Pirate; or, Bessie, the Lady of the Lagoon. By Col. Prentiss Ingraham.
- 206 One Eye, the Cannoneer; or, Marshal Ney's Last Legacy. By Capt. Fred. Whittaker.
- 207 Old Hard Head; or, Whirlwind and His Milk-White Mare. By Philip S. Warne.
- 208 The White Chief. By Capt. Mayne Reid.
- 209 Buck Farley, the Bonanza Prince; or, The Romance of Death Gulch. By Edward Willett.
- 210 Buccaneer Bess, the Lioness of the Sea; or, The Red Sea Trail. By Col. P. Ingraham.
- 211 Colonel Plunger; or, The Unknown Sport. By Capt. Frederick Whittaker.
- 212 The Brazos Tigers; or, The Minute-Men of Fort Belknap. By Buckskin Sam.
- 213 The War Trail; or, The Hunt of the Wild Horse. By Capt. Mayne Reid.
- 214 The Two Cool Sports; or, Gertie of the Gulch. By Wm. R. Eyster.
- 215 Parson Jim, King of the Cowboys; or, The Gentle Shepherd's Big "Clean-Out." By Capt. Frederick Whittaker.
- 216 The Corsair Planter; or, Driven to Doom. By Col. Prentiss Ingraham.
- 217 The Serpent of El Paso; or, Frontier Frank, the Scout of the Rio Grande. By Buckskin Sam.
- 218 The Wild Huntress; or, The Big Squatter's Vengeance. By Capt. Mayne Reid.
- 219 The Scorpion Brothers; or, Mad Tom's Mission. By Captain Mark Wilton.
- 220 The Specter Yacht; or, A Brother's Crime. By Col. P. Ingraham.
- 221 Desperate Duke, the Guadalupe "Galoot." By Buckskin Sam.
- 222 Bill, the Bizzard; or, Red Jacket's Double Crime. By Edward Willett.
- 223 Canyon Dave, the Man of the Mountain; or, The Troughs of Silver Spur. By Captain Mark Wilton.
- 224 Black Beard, the Buccaneer; or, The Curse of the Coast. By Col. P. Ingraham.
- 225 Rocky Mountain Al; or, Nugget Nell, the Waif of the Range. By Buckskin Sam.
- 226 The Mad Hussars; or, The O's and the Mac's. By Capt. F. Whittaker.
- 227 Buckshot Ben, the Man-Hunter of Idaho; or, The Cactus Creek Tragedy. By Capt. Mark Wilton.
- 228 The Maroon. By Capt. Mayne Reid.
- 229 Captain Cutsleeve; or, Touch-Me-Not, the Little Sport. By Wm. R. Eyster.
- 230 The Flying Dutchman of 1880; or, Who was Vanderdecken. By Capt. Whittaker.
- 231 The Kid Glove Miner; or, The Magic Doctor of Golden Gulch. By Col. P. Ingraham.
- 232 Orson Oxx, the Man of Iron; or, The River Mystery. By Isaac Hawks.
- 233 The Old Boy of Tombstone; or, Wagering a Life on a Card. By J. E. Badger, Jr.
- 234 The Hunters' Feast. By Capt. Mayne Reid.
- 235 Red Lightning, the Man of Chance; or, Flush Times in Golden Gulch. By Colonel Prentiss Ingraham.
- 236 Champion Sam; or, The Monarchs of the Show. By Col. T. H. Monterey.
- 237 Long-Haired Max; or, The Black League of the Coast. By Capt. H. Wilton.
- 238 Hank Hound, the Crescent City Detective; or, The Owls of New Orleans. By A. P. Morris.
- 239 The Terrible Trio; or, The Angel of the Army. By Buckskin Sam.
- 240 A Cool Head; or, Orson Oxx in Peril. By Isaac Hawks.
- 241 Spitfire Saul, King of the Rustlers; or, Queen Dixie's Grand "Round-Up." By Joseph E. Badger, Jr.
- 242 The Fog Devil; or, The Skipper of the Flash. By Capt. Fred. Whittaker.
- 243 The Pilgrim Sharp; or, The Soldier's Sweetheart. By Buffalo Bill.
- 244 Merciless Mart, the Man-Tiger of Missouri; or, The Waif of the Flood. By "Buckskin Sam." Maj. Sam S. Hall.
- 245 Barranca Bill, the Revolver Champion; or, The Witch of the Weeping Willows. By Captain Mark Wilton.
- 246 Queen Helen, the Amazon of the Overland; or, The Ghouls of the Gold Mines. By Col. Prentiss Ingraham.
- 247 Alligator Ike; or, The Secret of the Everglade. By Capt. Fred Whittaker.
- 248 Montana Nat, the Lion of Last Chance Camp. By Edward Willett.
- 249 Elephant Tom, of Durango; or, Your Gold Dust or Your Life. By Jos. E. Badger, Jr.
- 250 The Rough Riders; or, Sharp-Eye, the Seminole Scourge. By Buckskin Sam.
- 251 Tiger Dick vs. Iron Despard; or, Every Man Has His Match. By P. S. Warne.
- 252 The Wall Street Blood; or, Tick, Tick, the Telegraph Girl. By Albert W. Aiken.
- 253 A Yankee Cossack; or, The Queen of the Nihilists. By Capt. Frederick Whittaker.
- 254 Giant Jake, the Patrol of the Mountain. By Newton M. Curtis.
- 255 The Pirate Priest; or, The Planter Gambler's Daughter. By Col. P. Ingraham.
- 256 Double Dan, the Bastard; or, The Pirates of the Pecos. By Buckskin Sam.
- 257 Death-Trap Diggings; or, A Hard Man from 'Way Back. By Joseph E. Badger, Jr.
- 258 Bullet Head, the Colorado Bravo; or, The Prisoners of the Death Vault. By Captain Mark Wilton.
- 259 Outlass and Cross; or, The Ghouls of the Sea. By Colonel Prentiss Ingraham.
- 260 The Masked Mystery; or, The Black Crescent. By A. P. Morris.
- 261 Black Sam, the Prairie Thunderbolt; or, The Bandit-Hunters. By Col. Jo Yards.
- 262 Fighting Tom, the Terror of the Troughs. By Col. Thomas Hoyer Monterey.
- 263 Iron-Armed Abe, the Hunchback Destroyer; or, The Black Riders' Terror. Capt. Mark Wilton.
- 264 The Crooked Three; or, The Black Hearts of the Guadalupe. By Buckskin Sam.
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